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Two Dead-Square Sports;



OR, The Fairy Belle Bonanza.

STORY OF THE
RUCTION AT YELLOW DOG.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "THE DUDE DETECTIVE," "THE
ALL-AROUND SPORT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TAKE-IT-EASY TOM.

"There's millions in it."

"Mine crayshus, yes."

"And it all belongs to this slip of a girl, fresh from boarding school?"

"Dot vas right."

"But ought to belong to us?"

"S'help me Moses, yes!"

"Then it shall!" And Israel Hawke brought his fist down on the rough table, glaring across at his partner, Barney Behm, who remained silent.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THIS INTRUSION? THIS IS OUR PRIVATE OFFICE, AND OUTSIDERS ARE NEVER ADMITTED, EXCEPT BY PREVIOUS APPOINTMENT."

"Say something, Barney. Don't sit there like a lump on a log. When there is a chance for all this wealth we must be up and doing, or it will go into other hands. What are we to do?"

Hawke was the senior member of the firm, and though he had a strong Israelitish cast in his countenance, his speech showed no peculiarity beyond being, in purity of speech, considerably above that of the average business man of Yellow Dog.

He was rather a fine-looking man, of just a little more than middle age, and was supposed to be the brains of the combination, as he was by far the more popular member.

About Barney Behm there could not be a shadow of a doubt.

By daylight a glimpse of his strongly cut features was enough to decide his individuality, and in the darkness of midnight his speech would have betrayed him.

He never sought to pose for anything higher than what Yellow Dog had pronounced him, a grasping, avaricious, and totally unscrupulous money getter.

Only, now and then there was a twinkle of merriment in his beady, deep-sunken eyes when he heard some one lament that Major Hawke should be yoked with such a soulless machine as the afore-said Barney.

Both the partners were well dressed; but good clothes had very little redeeming effect on Barney. They only appeared to raise the grade of his rascality.

The major, as he was familiarly called, generally received the unwary individual who thought he could find his profit with the firm, but the later interviews were always with Barney, who had a heart as hard as the nether millstone.

The major was excitable by nature, and in unrestrained discourse showed it plainly in his speech. Barney was just the reverse, and, though always managing to keep the conversation going when necessary, was slow to speak to the point on an important subject.

He took his time to consider the question of his partner, and then, leaning forward, he whispered:

"Dot tepends, Ve might get rid of her."

Hawke's eyes never dropped, though those of Barney were staring straight into them.

"So we might, but if it was done here it would look too suspicious if we showed a bill of sale the next day. I might carry that thing through if I was alone; but, with the opinion Yellow Dog has of your morals, they would hang us both, if it was only on suspicion."

"Den, if we can't freeze her out, I don't know vot vos to pe done. Ter pest vay vos ter wait till she goomes. It ought not ter pe hardt ter manage her. It ish der friendt dot puzzles me. Vot vill he pe like?"

"Great heavens! the friend! I had forgotten. You don't suppose it will be a man, do you?"

"You didn't dink she wouldt pe bring-in' a vooman mit her, tid you? She says she comes mit a friendt. Dot means somepoddy she dinks she can tie to. Maype it wouldt pe pest to let him get der ditele, an' dhen clean it up mit him."

Hawke remained silent for a moment, stroking his goatee. This view of the case had never occurred to him.

"If I was younger," he finally said, "I might try a scheme. Her husband would have a very good thing of it if he was a widower. And we would have a good thing of it if he was the right sort of a friend of ours. How would it do if we were to furnish the article?"

"Mit a woman in der case I wouldt not trust der Patriarch Joseph himself. And dhen, to findt der man!"

"He's here, sport. Twirl your jenny! I'm stacking my chips for all there is in the bank."

A strange voice broke into the colloquy, and Barney sprung up in a way quite at variance with the deliberateness

he usually showed, whilst Israel Hawke stared in dismay.

The intruder was all there!

He had entered so silently that neither of the partners had heard him—or, at least, he had come as far as the doorway, in which he now stood, a smile on his battered, but somewhat handsome face.

The man was a sport all over, and sport of the freshest, most devil-may-care kind. Neither partner had ever seen him before.

While the two stood aghast, wondering how much he had heard, and how long he had been standing there, he glided into the room without even taking the trouble to doff his broad-brimmed hat, and threw himself into the chair which Barney had just vacated.

The action aroused the major from the state of stupefaction into which he had been thrown.

"What do you mean by this intrusion? This is our private office, and outsiders are never admitted here except by previous appointment."

"Blamed poor accommodations for men like Israel Hawke and Barney Behm! I say, if the business didn't justify something better I'd jump the business. That's all."

"You have not answered my question. If you have no business here, get out of this at once. We have no room for loafers; and men have been shot for less impudence than you have shown."

"Shot? Now, you're hitting me about where I live. When there's fun of that kind going. Take-it-easy Tom can always be counted on to play the limit. When is the ball going to open?"

The intruder settled back still more easily in his chair, and stared at Hawke, who was growing more and more angry.

"Leave this room at once!"

"Yesh, leave der room!" echoed Barney, who also had recovered somewhat from his shock. "Mine bartner ish excited, and no pissniss could you do here, not if it was for timunds py de bushel."

"Oh, I'm not particular about business—though I did come in with the idea I might borrow a thousand or two. Sort of grub stake arrangement, you understand, which would keep me going while I worked the placers at Yellow Dog."

"A mere gambler!" sneered the major.

"You're right. A gambler; but a mighty good one. From what I have heard of the gang, here, I'm just the right man for the place. Anyhow, something has to be done, for I'm shoal on the bar, and I must have coin to start me."

"What is this to me?" demanded Hawke.

"It ought to be a heapsight when I'm willing to give cent. per cent., and pay by the week."

"You have had our answer. We have no money to throw away with any adventure. We never loan without better security than a long tongue and a brass cheek. Take my advice, and get out of town at once. You may have trouble if you don't."

"Trouble? Why, pard, this is growing positively delightful! That's what I just dote on. Why, when it comes my way I take it easy, just so e-a-s-y; and then, the first thing you know, the other fellow is dead."

"Is that intended for a threat?" demanded Hawke, ruffling up.

"Threat! Bless your soul, no! I never threatened a man in my life. As I told you, I came in to try for a raise, and heard you pining for a man as I opened the door. I thought here was the thing I was looking for. But threaten—great guns and hammers! what would I threaten for? If that's the way you take it, I reckon I'm off. So long! I'll perhaps see you later."

He rose with a shake of the head and swaggered to the door.

"You sure you don't want me?" he asked as he turned around.

The major was bending forward, with

fire in his eyes, and pointing at him a heavy revolver which he had snatched from under the table.

"No; only to see you gone."

"I'm going. Lucky you didn't pull the hammer back. If I had heard the click I might have pulled myself—and I guess you can imagine what that means. Ta, ta! It's a pity for you we didn't deal."

"How much did he hear?" harshly asked the major, a moment later.

"I ton't dink more ash he saidt. It seems like a bity we tidn't dry to teal."

"What! with a stranger to the camp? A swaggering desperado? Never, though he may prove dangerous to us. I must learn who he is. Wait."

The major caught up his hat and hurried away, followed, a few moments later, by Barney, who had his own intentions.

Through the window he had seen which way the sport went, and at once took his trail, to overtake him before long.

"Te major is a queer fish, my tear, an' you wants to teal mit me. It ish cent-per cent, mind. Here's te lift you vants."

As he spoke he held out a hundred-dollar note, which Take-It-Easy Tom took without a moment's delay.

"Cert, pard; payable by the week. When I've got the interest ready I'll call on you again."

Then they separated, Barney hurrying back to get to the office before the return of his partner, whilst the sport swaggered toward the Eagle Hotel.

CHAPTER II.

SYBARITA'S COUSIN.

The conversation the two partners were having when interrupted by the stranger sport probably in a large measure explained itself.

Still, it may not be amiss to add a few words.

When Roger Courtney placed his earthly effects in the hands of Hawke and Behm, he thought he knew what he was doing; nor did he act altogether unwisely.

He intended to make it worth their while to act squarely, and he believed they would defend the Fairy Belle as no other men could, except the colonel—and he was the man he was afraid of.

There was not the least danger they would come to any agreement with Jack Ransome, but, on the contrary, they would fight him tooth and nail. They and the colonel were at daggers drawn, and it was uncertain which in the long run would prove victorious in the war they were waging.

If Courtney had lived, he would no doubt have taken care of his property in the energetic way which he did all things; but even before he had received the tumble which resulted in his death he knew there was to be some complication with Ransome over the title to the Fairy Belle, and, though he was certain the law would be with him, it was not so sure that law was the only thing to be considered.

Tenures down in Yellow Dog were quite frequently based on a forty-four calibre, judiciously handled.

He knew the major would fight, Barney would scheme, and both of them would go for the line which showed them the most money. So, he thought, he had arranged it in such a way that it would be too great a sacrifice to be dishonest.

Perhaps, under the original order of things, there would have been no temptation; but poor Jack did not provide for certain fresh discoveries. When at about the same time the partners found the Fairy Belle would most likely turn out a veritable bonanza, and they received a letter stating that Miss Courtney, in company with a friend, was already en route for Yellow Dog, to look after the effects of the late Roger Courtney—he had died while his daughter was abroad, completing her education—they began to consider seriously how they were to do justice to their opportunities.

As for Miss Sybarita, it was to be supposed she hardly knew of what sort was

the civilization of Yellow Dog, and that she was scarcely prepared for the cold realities of a mining town.

Nevertheless, at the very time Major Hawke was discussing her case with his wicked partner she was coming, and before many days her initiation had begun.

The railroad had been left far behind, and under the protection of Speckled Jimmy, the mighty Jehu, who tooled the stage to Yellow Dog and intervening points, she was fast making acquaintance with the wild scenery and the wilder people along the trail.

It happened that Colonel Jack Ransome was at the wayside hostelry of Ab Nye when the stage stopped for dinner.

He had been over at the Isabella mine, in which he had a small interest, and would have been glad to own a larger. Ab Nye's was just about half way between Red Bend and Yellow Dog, and the colonel intended to take the hearse there. He was sitting on the porch, conversing with Ab himself, when Speckled Jimmy came around the bend with a whoop, and he watched to see the passengers get out in a perfunctory manner, never imagining he had or would have any particular interest in them.

When the door was opened, first of all stepped out a long, lean, grizzly-haired gentleman, with a hatchet face, and suit of clothes that had once been of the finest blackcloth, but which now was quite threadbare and shiny.

He carried in his hand a much-worn satchel, through the rent corners of which sundry papers and books made themselves gently visible, and without a second glance at the face, which perhaps he might have found worth the studying, the colonel pronounced him a missionary, colporteur, or a gospel sharp in search of a field of usefulness.

Then out hopped the nattiest young fellow he had seen for many a day.

He certainly could not be twenty, Ransome thought, and looked to him like some young scion of the East who had been shipped West to rough it.

This young fellow hardly touched the ground before he turned, and coolly extended his hand.

Then the third passenger, whose appearance actually struck the colonel dumb.

A veritable blonde, of sweet eighteen, with a pink-and-white face, heavy golden ringlets, delicate features, and a form of medium height, but the most perfect proportions, and a toilet of fashion as adapted to a modern amount of roughing it, completed the object to which, for the moment, the colonel was almost ready to bow down for purposes of adoration.

Almost, but not quite. In fact, he half decided that his game would be to pay his court to the other member of the combination. He suspected at once that this seeming angel must be from some music hall, or other place where the female face divine ranks according to its beauty, and brings coin accordingly.

"And she has just roped in that kid—who must be the son of some millionaire. It's dollars to dimes his father would give a check, well up in the four oughts, if she would break her neck en route, so that Eddie came home to be consoled."

So the colonel thought to himself; and a closer observance of the pair as they moved side by side up to the door of the hotel convinced him his theory was right in a general way, even if he was not surely correct in the particulars.

At all events, the colonel did not care to put himself forward until he had obtained a little information in regard to the two, and did not rise from his seat for some time. When he did stroll into the office he met the young man coming out, and the way he was chewing at the cigar between his lips seemed to indicate something had not gone altogether right.

"Hello! What's the matter?" he asked briskly, as he saw evidences of a wreck.

There was a broken chair; and the head of Mister Nye looked as if it might be sent to the carpenter's shop, at the same time, for repairs.

"What's been going on here? Looks like a slaughter house."

"Guess that's about what they ought ter call it," growled Ab.

"Ther blamed leetle dude broke my head with a cheer fur, ez he called ett, speakin' insultin' ov his cousin. How war I ter know ett war his cousin, er thet he war sich a hair trigger sort ov kid?"

"Serves you right for being too fresh—it's a failing you have. I've no doubt you thought you were complimenting him when you spoke."

"That's what."

"Well, you ought to see he wasn't your style. Of course, you'll drop it, right now."

"Ett war me ez dropped, an' I reckon I'll stay thar, ef he don't kim back ter rub ett in."

"That's right. The house couldn't afford a shooting match over such a game unless you want to quit. Who are they, anyhow?"

"I'll never tell. Thar's ther register. He war puttin' ett all down when thar war a sorter interrupshun."

The colonel turned to the book on the counter and glanced at the two names, written in a bold, flowing hand, and then uttered an exclamation.

"Great guns and little pistols! 'Edgar Courtney, Miss Sybarita Courtney!' Why, man alive! that's poor Roger Courtney's daughter, and the woman who owns the Fairy Belle, if his title was worth anything. They must be on their way to Yellow Dog to look after the mine. So the youngster is only her cousin! I was mighty much afraid he was her husband. So! I wouldn't wonder if it would be the correct thing to introduce myself. By the way, the pious looking cove didn't register; do you know who he is?"

"From ther way thet pius lookin' cove takes keer ov his skin I hev a kinder sorter idea he ain't jest so sure ov his soul. He war hyer when ther racket begun, but he skipped so fast thet no man seen him go. You bet, he'll hev ter pony up afore he gits his knees onder my table. Suthin' else might rise up ter skeer him, an' he'd skin out an' furgit ter pay. Is she much swelled?"

Ab was not alluding to any of his guests, but to his head, which he was feeling gingerly. There was quite a lump in sight, and the tide seemed to be rising.

"Better not talk about it now. Wait till morning. It won't do any hurt, and if it's a lesson in etiquette you ought to be glad and thankful it didn't come in a tougher shape. Don't forget it, Ab, that the young lady has money to burn, and like as not it won't be many days before all Yellow Dog will be swearing by her. If you want it any plainer, I might say my revolver will be at her service. How soon will grub be ready?"

"On the table now. You'll hear the bell jingle in a minit."

Ab was a man upon whom a hint was not wasted, and in this case the colonel thought it might be needed. As the bell began to ring, and Nye returned no answer, Ransome made his way to the dining room—for the new hotel which Ab had lately built was perfect in its fixtures.

The Courtneys were already there, and hardly had the colonel taken his seat when the lank and sober faced passenger came in.

As he dropped into his chair with a sigh of satisfaction, Ab Nye's hand fell on his shoulder, whilst the host growled in his hoarsest voice:

"A dollar ef yer please. Thar ain't no spiscious lookin' keracter kin eat at my house 'thout he pays his fare in advance."

CHAPTER III.

THE EXPERIENCE OF PROFESSOR AJAX.

The lean man started up as though he had sat on a pin.

He thrust his hand in his pocket, but it came out empty.

"Really, sir, I—ah—must say, this treatment is unprecedented. You act—ah—as though you thought I might not have the dollar."

"That's just what I do think. I'm willin' ter be showed I'm mistookin'; but ef I ain't, I'd edvise you go sit out in ther hearse tell she starts. You can't wring ett in on m—"

"But, my dear sir—"

"Don't dear sir me. I ain't ther kind ez kin stand it. Pony up like a man, er jump ther table."

"Can, oh, can nothing move you?"

"Nary. I'm stiddy ez a rock; but you'll git a move on, mighty sudden, if you don't show up. Last time ov askin'."

Ab was in a horrible humor, or he never would have been so hard-hearted, nor would he have made such a public display.

"Perhaps you don't know I am a college professor, and a thoroughly reliable man, though at present in difficulties. I should—ah—have spoken before if I could have found you at leisure, but I was too hungry to wait."

The allusion to Ab's occupation at the time the professor sought him was too much.

He made a dive for the necktie of the lank man.

The professor was as quick as he was, for on the instant he slipped off his seat and under the table.

Coincident with his disappearance there came a savage growl, followed by a short bark, that seemed to come from the throat of a dog of by no means a gentle disposition.

Now, Ab owned just such a dog, which sometimes found its way under the table, and he had no objections to putting him to use.

"At him, Tige!" he shouted.

There was another growl, the sound of a rush, a struggle, the table was so violently agitated that it appeared about to overturn, and then came a yell and a thumping fall.

"Murder! Murder! Call him off!" yelled the professor in smothered tones.

"Drag him out!" repeated Ab, who wasn't likely to change his mind at the risk of having a funeral from the house.

Miss Courtney sprang up with a little cry, the colonel was feeling furtively for his revolver, whilst the young dude, throwing an arm around Sybarita, kicked a chair over in front of them and promptly covered the landlord with a pistol which came from no one could see where.

"Call off your dog or there will be a killing here without any frills. Quick! I never speak twice."

The order came in the sharp, short tones of one who meant to be obeyed, but Ab scarcely needed it. In spite of himself he was uneasy over the matter, and suddenly dove under the table.

At that very instant the head of the professor appeared at the other end. He sprung out very much alive, and, bounding up and on, tripped swiftly back, and dropped into his chair, though he managed to double his limbs up under him in a fashion which kept them well out of sight.

"Great Scott!" howled Ab from under the table. "Thar's no man hyer, ner dog, either."

The whole thing was such a surprise that the fellow passengers felt like bursting into a yell of laughter, though they restrained themselves. There was a curiosity to know what else was to follow, and they simply stood silent and staring.

The professor was not wasting good time in just that way.

As if by magic, he slipped a chunk of meat on his plate, and fairly drowned it, and a piece of bread, in gravy. Three potatoes looked large enough, when he took them, to serve as a meal of themselves, and almost in the same motion he accumulated a piece of pie. When Ab came out from under the table, a look of the most profound and puzzled astonishment on his face, he was already hard at work.

And just then Tige, who had heard his name from the distance, came bounding into the room.

The blank amazement on Abner's face capped the climax, and every one went

off into a roar of laughter, save the professor, who had just swallowed nearly a whole potato in his haste, and was now reaching for his pie.

"Here, landlord. I guess he's earned that dinner, and I'll put up the dollar."

The young dude's revolver had disappeared, and in its place he held a silver "cartwheel," which he deftly tossed into the open mouth of the landlord, without ever hitting a tooth.

Then, all hands made a rush for their seats again, and as Edgar Courtney laid his revolver by the side of his plate, just as the colonel deposited one behind his, Ab was given fair notice that the moments for foolishness had passed, and that they all intended to attend strictly to business.

Except in the matter of coffee, there was not much waiting to do, each one being expected to help him or herself; but whatever waiting there was, Ab did it.

"Ett's a hoss on me—er, rayther, a dorg," he remarked, as he slipped a cup of steaming Rio on the table at the professor's elbow.

"You done that well, an' I ain't bearin' no malice; but you look out you don't hev ter tackle Tige in airnest. Fur a minit I was sure you war a gone goslin'."

"Thanks! No sugar, please. I have frequently learned by bitter experience that my most despised accomplishments count for more in this world than my knowledge of Sanscrit, which, I assure you, is above the average. There are methods of dealing with Tige which, perhaps, I have not forgotten; but I hope I shall not be compelled to use them. They seem now to me to be contrary to the means of grace, and when I experienced a change of heart I tried to put them far from me. If I might be so bold as to ask for another piece of pie? The other was eaten under such circumstances of haste that I lost its true aroma."

Such a lecture as that satisfied Nye. He silently slid the pie on the empty plate, and never opened his mouth again to the professor.

After dinner Edgar Courtney met the lean man on the porch and extended a mate to the cigar he was carelessly lighting.

"Thank you, sir; but I never smoke; and if I did I would not willingly add to the indebtedness under which I am laboring."

"Don't speak of it, uncle. The indebtedness is all on the other side. Haven't had so much fun since dad died."

"Nevertheless, my predicament, which you relieved, was peculiarly unfortunate. As a stranger, I can only accept the accommodation until I can secure a little loan from the Bishop, or some one of the little flock worshipping at Yellow Dog. With my credentials I do not think it will be hard to obtain relief from this annoying embarrassment."

"I suspect you will find the little flock practically extinct. From what I hear of Yellow Dog, there is no Bishop, the wolves have devoured the lambs, and the kids have gone back among the goats."

"I have still my stock of books and pamphlets, for which there should be a ready market, since they are the kind the unregenerate many are most needing."

Courtney smiled his dissent.

"Ah, and that reminds me. Why, why should we not deal directly? Allow me to call your attention!"

He proceeded to open his grip.

"Here are a dozen copies of 'The Dairyman's Daughter,' positively the most saleable book on the market. Let me furnish you with them at wholesale prices, plus the cost of transportation. The profit at 25 per cent. advance will be some slight remuneration for your late liberality."

"Excuse me, but the remuneration ought to work the other way."

"What, not as a matter of money! Then allow me to present you one as a free gift, and to recall me to your remembrance between now and the hour

when I shall return your loan. It has been but a simple thing on your part, yet, that dollar has drawn me towards you with hooks of steel. You will find, ah, that you have secured the devotion of a lifetime; and if at any moment I can aid you, I am yours till death."

The professor looked as though he really meant it, and was scribbling a dedication on the fly-leaf, which young Courtney looked at curiously when the book was handed to him.

"To my Tried Friend,

From Ajax Budge, late Professor of Chiromancy and High Aesthetics in the University of Nevaho."

"All right, professor! There's lots of them have told me that; but I hope I won't have to put any of them to the test."

The appearance of the colonel put an end to the conversation in a personal shape, and what they all said to each other before the stage came around would not be of much interest to the reader. In half an hour more they were bowling merrily along down the grade which led to the bridge over the Devil's Canyon.

This was one of the improvements put in three or four years before when Bouteille took charge of the Isabelle mine, and since then the road had been materially improved, especially since the finds at Yellow Dog. It is true, the road agents destroyed the bridge about the time it was first built, but they had been practically annihilated, and it was rebuilt immediately afterward, and from that day to this it had been one of the triumphs of home-grown engineering skill, as it swung over the dizzy chasm.

The colonel leaned out of the window uneasily, as he noted they were approaching at unwonted speed.

"Throw over your brake, Jimmy, and get a pull on. If you hit the breaker at this gait you'll have us all over into the drink."

"Too late!" answered Jimmy, as he kicked the useless beam, and took a careful pull on the wheelers.

And then, they hit the bridge, from which came a loud, crash of warning, and a sudden sinking of the structure told its own story.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BRIDGE GOES DOWN.

Of the four passengers only one seemed aware of the danger coming, and he did not anticipate it soon enough to give warning.

He was already leaning half-way out, the better to speak to Jimmy, without alarming the others; and at that crash he simply pitched himself forward, turning a complete somersault, to alight on his feet.

He did not stop at that.

Striking perilously near to the edge of the bridge, he managed, nevertheless, to save himself, and to throw himself sideways. In a scrambling, ungainly fashion he tumbled over upon the solid abutment just as the timbers gave way, and bridge and stage went down into the awful abyss.

As those within had no warning, they had little chance to brace themselves for the shock, or speculate on what was to be their fate. Young Courtney simply threw his arm around Sybarita, who uttered a little cry of alarm, whilst the professor caught at the arm straps on either side and raised himself from the seat.

Down they went—yet not to the certain destruction which the colonel imagined as he looked over his shoulder from where he had landed, on the very edge of the opening chasm.

Through some peculiarity in the breaking of the structure, it seemed as though they were falling through a funnel, and they dropped almost perpendicularly from their starting point.

So quickly that it was almost immediate, they felt a shock; then a second wrench, and then the coach remained

swaying and safely lodged in the very heart of a huge tree which had received it, while the horses, which were violently wrenched away, went on down, to be dashed to death on the rocky bed of the canyon.

The first one to speak was Speckled Jimmy.

"Beats ther Dutch—an, they took Holland! All serene an' right side up hyer; how are ett with you, inside?"

"All right, up to the present time!" came back in the clear accents of Edgar Courtney. "How long does she stop here?"

"That's what I'm mighty much afraid of. Ett 'pears ter be hanging' by ther eye-winkers, so ter speak; an' a weenty, leetly shove'd send us down ther flume. Jest don't wiggle yer smallest toe-nail tell I see how ter git yer out 'thout disturbin' ther equelubrium."

There was a good deal of sense in what Jimmy said, for, really, the coach appeared none too well anchored, and a slight shift in the ballast might prove disastrous. With the greatest care he swung himself off on to a limb of the tree, and carefully examined the situation.

Those inside had received a terrific jolt, and were somewhat bruised; but by something little short of a miracle had received no very serious damage. Sybarita turned pale for the moment, and her young companion grew a little white about the mouth, but neither of them had been overcome by the danger.

The professor seemed to have suffered the least of all, and gave no sign of excitement over the accident.

Jimmy discovered it was easier to go down than up, and that, though their peril was not absolutely ended, there was a fair prospect of being able to reach the bottom of the canyon in safety.

The tree was gnarled and stubby in all of its immensity, and the trunk jutted out from the wall of the gulch in such a way that it could be descended without much risk so long as one kept a sure head.

He got the door open, and one after the other his passengers slid from limb to limb.

The professor came last of all, and as each one looked specially to personal safety, his progress was unnoted until there came a crash and a cry.

The professor had lost his hold and dropped from his perch on an upper branch.

Fortunately, as he went crashing downward, his hand caught on one of the lower ones.

There he hung, the bough, swaying violently up and down, threatening to shake him from his hold, whilst it was utterly impossible for him to hang there for more than a moment.

It was a time of peril when the bravest heart might be at a loss what to do, but there was one who did not hold back. Edgar Courtney gave a swift glance, taking in the position exactly, and then, darting forward, appeared fairly to dive off the limb on which he was standing.

There was no question, however, but that he knew what he was about. By his bent knees he swung under the bough and made a swift grasp at Ajax, who was just fairly in reach.

His hands closed on the collar of the professor, and by a herculean effort he raised him up so that his two arms were flung over the bough he had been grasping with but one hand.

Then the young man let go his hold, swung himself back, and rejoined Sybarita, whilst Ajax Budge scrambled back to the trunk of the tree at his leisure.

Up above them they heard the clapping of hands from the colonel, who had witnessed the daring feat, but no one seemed enough moved to answer him. In silence they reached the rocky wall of the canyon, inspected the fortunate cleft in which the tree was anchored, looked hopelessly up, and thoughtfully down, finally beginning the descent, which was made without further accident.

Both walls of the canyon appeared about equally perpendicular, but Speckled Jimmy was aware it was possible to ascend on the side nearest Yellow Dog. In addition, he had an idea, which decided him. He barely glanced at the dead horses, and then began the uphill work, which finally brought them once more on the trail.

Although the colonel was in plain sight, there were just thirty miles between them, provided the journey was made with average safety.

It was that far around by the old trail, which did not make a junction with this until half way to Yellow Dog.

There was no use in the colonel trying to join them, and when he shouted good-bye his voice scarcely hinted at the distance which practically divided them. Miss Sybarita looked after him with something like wonder as he turned to tramp back to Ab Nye's.

"Needn't worry about him, miss," explained Speckled Jimmy. "He'll git a cayouse ov Ab, an' take ther old trail. Ett ain't much fur a waggin route, but he kin dust along lively, an' git ter Yaller Dorg most ez soon ez we kin. Fact are, onless we strike ther no'thbound stage, an' git Billy ter take us back, ett's blamed likely he'll git thar afore us, an' let 'em know we're a comin'."

The intelligence seemed to rejoice Edgar Courtney.

"Oh, then there is a chance for us, after all. Good boy! I was only too much afraid we would have to walk the whole way. Now, if we could arrange about our luggage, everything would have a lovely prospect."

"Let ther kunnel alone fur that. He'll see ett's res'kyed afore he goes funder; an' Ab kin send it on. Let Ransome alone fur doin' ther han'sum when thar's a leddy in ther case."

Sybarita gave a sigh. Though she was well shod, and stepped along bravely, she evidently did not fancy the element of doubt in regard to the north bound coach. If anything happened that it did not turn up according to schedule, or it was already overlaid, she could fancy what sort of a tramp was before her.

For fully half an hour they trudged along; and then, in the distance, they heard the clear notes of a horn, marvelously well blown. Billy was entering the narrow trail, where he might expect to find Speckled Jimmy, since that worthy was evidently behind time.

"Hyer he kims!" shouted Jimmy, executing a pirouette in the road.

"Allers on time to ther dot. May 'zwell stop right hyer, whar thar's room ter turn 'round. Ett wouldn't do no good ter meet him on ther chute. He couldn't stop fur us, nohow."

They were on a short stretch of even ground, where there was plenty of room to turn about, and the little party seated themselves by the trailside.

Five, ten minutes, they waited. Then they heard the clatter of trace chains, the cling of hoofs, and a few minutes later the coach came in sight, toiling up the rising ground at a moderate pace.

There was no trouble about halting Billy as he saw the procession by the roadside, and a few words sufficed to explain the situation to the satisfaction of both him and his passengers.

There were half a dozen men in the coach, but there was no question made over giving the best seat to the lady and her companion; several men crawled up outside when the turn had been made; and in a few moments the hearse was slipping softly down the trail, on the back track.

Time was an object, so that no one cared to lose any by going on to inspect the wreck, though Billy was curious to see for himself how complete it was. Speckled Jimmy had taken the place alongside of him, and he and the professor were kept busy answering questions as to the minutia of the affair, and the probable reason for the catastrophe.

About this last Jimmy was as much in the dark as any of them, and ascribed it

to 'nacherul cussidniss," but he had a good deal to say about the cool way his passengers had met the danger.

"An' them two kids inside, they jest never turned a hair, but took that drop ez though it war part ov ther rigular skidjule. An' him a savin' ther perfesser's life arterwards, cool ez yer please. Sez, sez he, 'Oh, that's nothin' but a bit ov what we learned in ther gymnazium, and ef it hedn't bin so fur to ther ground yer wouldn't a thought nothin' ov it, no how.'"

"He must be a good one," suggested Billy.

"Good! Thet ain't no name fur ett. He's a jingbacked gullyflugiu an' everlastin' carevan on wheels. An' he's jest a peach, besides. You wouldn't think ett, but he kin han'le a gun with ther best ov 'em, an' it would a did yer heart good ter see him git ther drop on Ab Nye when that ole war hoss war a prancin'. No, ther young leddy are jest safe when he's ter ther front, an' yer kin spell it with great big letters.

What answer Billy might have given remains unrecorded, for right here there was an unexpected interruption not down in the bills in the shape of a stern voice from the roadside.

"Han's up, thar, sweetness, an' kick over yer brake; we got yer lined!"

"Oh, golly!" groaned Billy, as he swiftly obeyed his orders; "ett's road agents, by mighty!"

CHAPTER V. AN ASSASSIN'S SHOT.

When Barney Behm, after placing a hundred dollars in the hand of the sport, turned away, the latter shrugged his shoulders, and gave but one backward glance before resuming his interrupted course.

"Many thanks, pardner," he said to himself; "though I oughtn't to call you pardner. If I'm not 'way off, you're not exactly the sort Tom Taylor generally gives that title to. He's built from toenail to topknot for a tricky, shyster blood leech, and I'm betting he fills the bill.

"All the same, I'm betting he's heard of me as a good man to tie to, and as long as I keep my interest up, and the principal back, unless I buck his own game too hard, he'll keep an eye out for my safety. Ha, ha! What a thing it is. 'Shent per shent, payable weekly.' All right, old man, you've got a good thing of it—as long as it lasts. It wasn't such a bad move I made, though who would ever have supposed I could get a loan from an outfit like that with no better security than the word of Take-it-easy Tom.

"Wonder what they were talking about when I dawned in? If I had come a little sooner, or kept quiet a trifle longer, perhaps I would have known. I was always fresh about chipping in the early part of the game. Ears open, Thomas, and perhaps there's the interest in the outfit; and maybe, before I'm done with them, they'll even not care to crowd me for the principal."

It might have relieved the mind of the major could he have known how little the sport really heard; yet there had been no great mistake about that.

Take-it-easy Tom had heard something, and what he had listened to made him anxious to learn more. The strange thing was that Hawke never for a moment thought of using the stranger as a tool. Probably he was too good a judge of physiognomy for that.

If there was anything going the sport would be apt to be at the front—or else to be found on the other side.

When the major had got some little distance from the office he moderated his pace.

It was not far to the Eagle Hotel, and he had no desire to come to it at racing speed, even though there might be but few around at that time of day to see.

Smith, the proprietor of the house, ran a bar in connection with the hotel, and, as his prices were made more especially

for the traveling public, and were about twice as high as at the neighboring saloons, his patronage was somewhat limited, though the major dropped in occasionally. He never stinted himself in the matter of his enjoyments, and knew a good thing when it was to be met with.

"New man in town," he remarked, apropos of nothing.

"Looks like a leather headed sport who may give lots of trouble before we get through with him. Does he stop with you?"

"Nary, if I know who you're meanin'. But you're not far out on him. He's a rustler from 'wayback, if he is a leetle short on funds. They say he's one of the dead game kind."

"Been around among the boys, has he?"

"You're right he has. And they didn't find any discount on him once. Skeeters and that gang tried to bluff. Great Scott! He smiled and said that was what he traveled on. From what I heard, they didn't care to crowd the game after that. Kind of waiting, yer know, ter see how big it would pay."

"And what seems to be his game?"

"All that's in the ring. If you want a likely man to run the Fairy Belle, reckon you could get him; and if you want someone to teach you ther full value of two tens and a side ace, he would be all there. Wouldn't funk much if he had ter turn his hand ter holdin' up ther hearse. He jest strikes me ez good all 'round."

Perhaps Smith suspected the major had reasons of his own for the questions; or it may have been he was talking from the fullness of his heart.

At all events, as he was known to be a man of good judgment in such matters, what he said only went to confirm the opinion Hawke had already formed; and if he had only known it, Smith was not doing the sport the best turn in the world.

The major made no particular sign that he was personally interested, but when he started away it was with his mind made up. If he had known his partner had furnished the stranger sport with the sinews of war for the campaign on which he was entering, Hawke would have been apt to have expressed an opinion with considerable more profanity than he usually employed.

There was one thing he would have given something handsome to know.

What brought the sport to Yellow Dog?

Had he just drifted thither, and was his poverty the true thing; or had he some game to play, to aid in which he had made this assumption? If this last was the case, what more likely than that he was actually on the trail of the major?

Surely, the latter had been in enough cool deals to make the thing probable.

So the Major thought as he muttered:

"One thing is certain. If the boys don't provide for him, I'll have to; but, if he's fresh as Smith makes him, like as not they'll run him out. I'll give them a little time to get in their work, and meantime be filling my holdout with a full hand. There is Creepy now; the very man I want to see."

The major was on his way to the office once more, by a roundabout route, and the fellow he had indicated in his thoughts caught a slight signal which he understood well enough.

Half an hour later he made his appearance, to find Hawke alone.

The major looked up briskly.

"You've seen this new sport that's in town, haven't you?"

"Didn't I, jest? Skeeter an' me. An' we warn't in it."

"He showed up here and tried to run his bluff game on me. Of course, I turned him down; but I want to know what he is after. Watch him and let me know. And if Skeeter goes to get even he can draw on me for a doctor bill."

"Ett's same old wages ef I spots him?"

"Of course."

"An' ef s'uthin' axidental happens, an' me nerves gits a shock, you'll make it right?"

"Certainly—if the other fellow catches it just a leetle bit harder."

"That's good enough. Reckon I onderstands ther game, an' Skeeters'll be with me."

"You understand. Git!"

Creepy was not the sort the major cared to have about him any longer than necessary, but in all Yellow Dog he could not have found a better man to put on the trail.

He was a little, foxy fellow, with a vicious face, and a step as light as a feather. More than once the major had hired him to shadow a man; and every time he made a report that covered the ground. He could be as sly as a panther and as tireless as a wolf, never giving up the trail until he had worked it for the last dollar that was in it.

And if there was a dead man at the end of the trail, only Creepy knew who had left him there, though the major might suspect. In the present case he would almost as soon as not have had the whole town hear the conversation.

That evening the sport made his appearance around town in company with a miner well known; but who seldom showed up at the saloons, and never to share in the rougher amusements of the town. Now and then he might take a few hands in a quiet game of poker, but it was solely for amusement, and he did not hesitate to jump the game the moment it seemed in danger of getting "heavy."

David Wright was his name—Honest Dave they generally called him—and it was in his shanty the sport was staying, though whether from motives of economy or for old acquaintance sake, no one knew.

The evening went by quietly enough, and it was not until the two were on their way home that anything happened worth chronicling.

Then it was the sport leaned toward his companion and said, in a low tone:

"Whatever happens, Dave, keep your head on. We're followed."

"Your lead, pardner. Reckon I kin foller suit er trump."

The two were nearly at the end of their journey, and an eye only a trifle less keen than Tom Taylor's might have failed to note the shadow creeping in their rear.

When they had reached the front of the cabin without any further sign from the shadower, Take-it-easy Tom halted.

He had no very deeply laid plan; but it seemed to him if there was to be trouble at all, it might as well come now. So, without further word of warning to his companion, he stepped away from him and stood plainly revealed in the moonlight.

As he fancied it might do, the action precipitated matters.

From the corner of a cabin near by there came a little jet of flame; and at the same instant Taylor threw up his hands and dropped heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SPORT IS ASTOUNDED.

Wright was not a shooting man himself; but, like the rest of the miners, he always went armed.

His hand dropped to his pistol at once, but before he could draw, he heard the low tones of the sport:

"Easy, man; just so e-a-s-y. Stoop down and carry me in. They may as well imagine they have made the scoop."

"Have it your way, pardner," came back in guarded tones.

"I don't jest fancy you're so bad hurt; but what you says goes."

Without more ado he stooped down and carefully gathering the sport up in his arms, bore him into the house. Meantime, if they were watched from the covert whence came the shot, the dangling arms and limp body was horribly suggestive.

Watched they were, by two men who, at that moment, old pards though they had been, were uncertain whether or not to turn and rend each other.

They had been keeping an eye on the sport all evening, and it was greatly to their surprise that, though he made occasion to show he was fairly well supplied with money, he took no measures to get into a game.

In fact, he distinctly declined several invitations to play, and went away at such an early hour that he at once lost caste with those who noticed his going.

The moment Tom Taylor and his friend left the Ophir saloon by the front entrance, Skeeter and the man Hawke had interviewed that afternoon left by the rear, and stealing along for a little in the shadows kept them well in sight.

Before long the trailers became satisfied of the direction the two intended to take, yet they were willing to provide for any mistakes.

"Ett's ther bank of Californy ter a soap box that they means ter strike Dave's shanty an' bunk in; but then ett ain't jest dead sure," said Skeeter, in a low whisper.

"I'll make right acrost ter head 'em off, an' you might foller, ter ketch on ef they flies ther track. In course, Dave don't count in ther round up, one way er t'other."

"Skeet, then, an' keep yer head in ther dark. He's a sharp un, an' ef he draps to ther game, ez drap he may, ett's dead level he'll try ter give a kick."

"All ther better. Slow an' stiddy goes."

The two separated, Skeeter hurrying off on a flank movement, whilst Creepy kept along well in the rear, never doubting that he was altogether eluding observation.

In this way it happened that Skeeter was lurking behind an empty building when the two approached Wright's cabin.

They passed him at a distance of only a dozen yards, but, unfortunately for his purpose, Dave happened to be the nearer of the two, and even at that short distance the lurker feared to risk a shot; though he fully intended, when time and distance were right, to down the stranger.

Then, when the sport stepped aside and appeared to be taking a good night view of Yellow Dog by moonlight, the time seemed to have come, and he raised the heavy revolver held in his hand, which he had carefully cocked before the wanderers came in sight.

The distance was not great, and the light none too dim for pistol shooting, though with a rifle it might have puzzled the tough to draw a fine bead.

He was more than a fair shot and had not a doubt of being able to lodge his bullet where he wanted, yet he hesitated.

"Shell I, er shan't I?" ran his thoughts; and then something in the attitude of the sport provoked his anger, and the weapon exploded.

That momentary hesitation made all the difference in the world, for, as his finger tightened, a hand dropped lightly on his shoulder. Creepy had come up behind him, silent as a ghost.

A swift glance showed him who the intruder was, even before his thumb had forced back again the hammer of the rapidly cocked weapon, and he turned once more to mark the fate of his shot.

When he saw Dave Wright raising the sport, to carry him into the shanty, he gave a quick whirl, and hissed, sharply: "Blast yer! what did yes sp'ile my aim fur? Fur half a cent I'd let yer hev it right whar he got it."

"Stiddy, Skeeter, ett's time ter travel. I war jest a wantin' ter make sure it war our man, an' how war I ter know you war meanin' ter shoot on sight?"

"Thought that's what we war hyar fur. I mighty much feared yer tipped me wrist when yer teched me arm, but yer hit it a shade late. An' now, I reckon, you'll hev ther cheek ter ax ther boss fur half a century, an' say nothin' to him how yer nigh most sp'iled ther job."

"Ther job ain't nothin'; ett's ther reesk I'm chargin' fur; an' ef you swings both'll stritch rope. Drap it, though, tell we git back to ther Ophur."

The two were already slipping along, choosing their route where the shadows lay darkest, and stepping silently as a brace of phantoms. Early though it might seem to the patrons of the saloon, the staid and sober workers of the town were in bed and sleeping, whilst none of the sports appeared to be abroad on the streets, until, just as they neared the Ophir, two men slipped away, melting into the night with a silent suddenness that had something uncanny about it.

"Thar we goes," chuckled Skeeter.

"An' ef it ain't ther neatest alley bye out ov jail you kin rock me ter sleep."

"Et'll work teel someun draps ter them, an' axes whar they bin puttin' in time. Some night we'll try it once too often, an' they'll ketch all four on us."

"I ain't so much afeared ov that ez ov Phil Case a blowin'. He could tell a mighty rocky story ef he war pinched, an' ef we ever have ter cross him we'll hev ter send him out ov ther wet, sure."

"They knows ett, an' you bet they'll be keeping out ov any tangle. Never mind that. We jest got time enough fur a hand er two ter swear by, an' then we'll hev ter mog off an' meet ther boss."

"Wisht we hed a better yarn ter tell him. We know he drapped, but we cain't say jest how hard."

"I'm keerin' a dog-gone sight more that we didn't git his boodle. Might ez well hev downed Dave along with him, an' then we could a cleaned up at our leisure."

"Don't be too blamed bloody minded. Ain't ett ernough we 'arned a hundred, an' got back 'thout any one spottin' us? We ain't got much time ter lose ef both ov us are ter meet ther boss. An, I sw'ar, I'd sooner you'd be thar ter tell yer own story."

With a little grunt of disgust, the other led the way into the Ophir by the same route they had left it, never once dreaming that the man they supposed dead, or at least badly wonuded, was almost within arm's length of them and had heard the closing part of their conversation.

Hardly had Wright pushed the door to behind them when the sport slipped from his arms with a low laugh.

"Ha, ha! Luck forever; and when it's hog luck there's nothing like it. I didn't see how he was going to miss me myself, but his lead flew high, anyhow, and I dropped fairly quick to the flash. You go out, now, and look around."

"Jest ez you has it; but I'm countin' on you ter git even ef they drops me."

"Ten chances to one there won't be anybody there to see you, but just you rustle around a little, as though you were looking for the man that slew your pard."

"An' ef I finds him?"

"Oh, dog-gone it, you ain't going to find anybody, and if I'm not here when you get back I wouldn't advise you to sit up for me. I'm getting out of the back window, you understand. Get a hustle on, now. This is one of the times when it don't pay to go easy."

Dave went out, gun in fist, and looked around a little.

He did not get a glimpse of any one, nor did he expect to.

When he came back after his fruitless search, the cabin was vacant, and the open window showed which way Take-it-easy Tom had gone.

Taylor had his own idea which way the would-be assassin would go, and so it happened he was able to execute the same maneuver Skeeter had done and ensconce himself where he heard distinctly a part, at least, of their conversation.

"Earned a hundred, did they? Maybe yes, and maybe no; but if that same boss gambles much on it he'll be apt to run against a flush royal in the hands of a man who knows how to play it. Who the deuce is the boss, though, and what has he got against yours truly?"

They were a very pretty pair of conundrums, but the sport was a master hand at finding the answers to such questions, and he had not thought over them long

before he had made a shrewd guess that was not a hundred miles wide of the truth.

"I'll bet a horse—and outside of Barney Behm's century it's about all I'm worth in the world—that I could call the name of that same boss. What's the matter with laying low for half an hour, till they've had a chance to air their elegant mugs at the Ophir, and making that alibi solid? Then they can lead me straight to him and—well, to-night won't be the time to talk right out, but we'll set her straight some time. I usually do."

So the sport meditated, still remaining in hiding, though the temptation to follow on into the Ophir, and even up, was strong.

The time passed slowly enough while he kept his eyes on the saloon. He was not sure which way the men would make their exit, nor could he even be certain they would leave together. It required close watching to make sure they did not get out unnoticed, but at length his vigilance was rewarded.

Creepy came out and took a keen glance around. Probably he gave a signal that the coast was clear, for immediately afterwards his partner made his appearance, and the two moved off together.

Although, doubtless, they did not anticipate being followed, they stole along in a furtive way that convinced the sport he had made no mistake; and he followed with every whit as much caution, though they led him a dance which seemed to take him all over the town.

"If this keeps up much longer, I'll have to shoot in self defense," mused the sport, balancing his revolver in his hand, and peering forward to make sure of the dimly seen strollers.

"My legs are worn to stumps already; if they go another hundred miles they'll be gone altogether. Confound the fools! why can't they take it easy?"

The men stepped off now, at a pace which was by no means easy to equal, yet Taylor was up to the emergency.

A few minutes later he was almost ready to break out into audible laughter. "A horse on me!" he muttered.

"If I haven't run them to their own hole you can call my mother's eldest a liar from 'way back. Is the talk with the boss off, or are they dressing up for a fresh start?"

He crouched down at some little distance from the cabin, which he recognized as one pointed out to him as the abiding place of the man with whom he had some chaff the night before.

When, after waiting for some time, the two did not reappear, he was more than half in the notion of giving them up, but finally he stole up on tip-toe and listened.

Almost the first, low-pitched sound which came to him through the flimsy walls of the shanty told him his quarry was there; but not alone. The voice of the speaker seemed utterly unfamiliar, and he listened with eagerness, attracted wonderfully the more he heard.

After a little the voice dropped into a whisper; and any further sense he made was from the reply of Skeeter, though that was indistinct enough.

"The infernal villains," he muttered, as, finally, he stole away. "If I was right sure I'd shoot 'em all. There may be some mistake about it, and I'll take it easy; but if the game goes on I'll be on the ground to play."

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTAIN NIGHTKING IS CAUGHT NAPPING.

Coincident with the shout there was a bang of the coach door on the opposite side.

There was one passenger who had hardly been caught napping.

Immediately after the coach had come to a halt there was a sound of low voices, engaged in a muttered conversation, which, however, only lasted a minute.

The fact was the coach had been recognized as the one which had passed

the spot but a little while before, going north; and that was the puzzle.

After all, your thoroughbred road agent is wary enough, until the time comes for boldness, and it might be this was a trap. The same voice finally spoke up:

"Say, how's this, Jimmy?" This ain't your go-cart, an' Billy thar jest went by a bit ago. Whar's yer outfit?"

"Lyin' at the bottom ov ther Devil's Gulch—er mighty nigh ett—whar ett dropped when ther bridge slumped down."

"How does it come yer escaped?"

"Got cotched in a tree onder ther bridge. Billy couldn't go no fuder, so he's on ther back track fur ther old trail."

"Purty tough deal, that; but I reckon it needn't interfere with regular business. We hedn't allowed ter molest ther hearse north, fur thar ain't ernuf fodder on it ter feed a sick calf; but your outfit, Jimmy, are our meat; an' we may 'zwell clean 'em up all both tergether."

"Ett's your say-so, boss; but tetch 'em lightly. Arter lookin' death in ther face back thar ett's tough on ther narves ter meet Captain Nightking hyer. Ef yer finds 'em skittish you better make en allowance."

"That's ernough, Jimmy Simmer. One at a time, gents, an' line up along ther trail. We'll make it short an' sweet—'spe'chully ef thar's ary kickin'."

The majority of the passengers were well enough acquainted with the formula in such cases to need no further explanation.

Billy was wrapping the lines around the brake beam preparatory to leading off, when he was stopped in short order.

"You an' Jimmy keep yer seats. Yer goin' along by offen ernough ter know et 'd be mighty onhealthy if thar was ary frills, an' it's dead sure your pockets ain't wuth ther emptyin'. You, inside, step out."

Very gravely did they come, one at a time, and without the slightest thought of resistance. As the road agent had said, the passengers bound north were so devoid of cash they were hardly worth the robbing. Last of all, Miss Sybarita stepped out; and, though there was a look of anxiety on her handsome face, she was taking the proceedings with commendable coolness.

"An' now, you fellers on top, git a move on. Jest reccomember thet Captain Nightking and his six are right on deck, and stand no nonsense."

The muzzles of several Winchesters could be seen peering from the covert, and it was well known that there were at least half a dozen in the band of Nightking. It was not a safe thing to hang back; and it was positive wildness to resist.

When the passengers were all ranged in line, with their hands elevated, a road agent stepped carelessly out into plain view, and advanced to the head of the platoon. From his voice he was a different man altogether.

In one hand he held a pistol, in the other a hat.

"Keep an eye on them, boys," he called back, without ever turning his head.

"Aye, aye, sir!" came the swift response.

"We'll drop ther fust gerloot ez stirs!"

"Now, then, gents, I'll pass in your rear, and one at a time you will hand back your wealth, and drop it in the hat. As long as you give me a square deal there will be no trouble, but you can see how it is yourselves. I can't afford to take any risks—and I don't."

Singly, and without a word, each man dropped in his contribution; and no one thought it worth while to keep back anything, unless it was some trifle of change, loose in his pocket. As there would be a search, and perhaps some bloody work, in case the amounts subscribed fell short of what seemed the correct thing, no one cared to run the risk.

"And now, miss; sorry to trouble you

Money, watch, loose valuables, papers—turn them over. Sorry to discommode you, but we know you have plenty more back where these came from."

"You come a trifle too late. What little there were of my own effects went down into the gulch with the stage, and I have not a thing of value about me except this ring, which is at your service."

Sybarita spoke in the easy accents of truth, and as though she might really be regretting that Nightking found her so empty handed, but it was not so easy to convince the road agent.

"Maybe you left your purse there, and maybe you didn't, but it's certain and sure you never let go of certain important documents relating to the Fairy Belle, which we might be able to coin with you into good, hard cash. If you please, hand them over."

"I am not sure I know what you mean, but one thing is certain. Whatever I had in the documentary line went down with the coach."

"Sorry, then, for I will be under the disagreeable necessity of asking you to accompany me back to the gulch and point the stuff out."

"But, sir, I can show you nothing of any value which you could not find for yourself. With this you should be content; and any demand beyond that is actual cruelty."

When the two drivers looked down from their perch at the road-agent it seemed as though they could see him grin through his mask.

At all events, there was something of a laugh, as he answered.

"Sorry, mum, but a little judicious cruelty is the very thing to make our business thrive, though we're not half as bad as some of them; and as for anything fatal—we never try it until the last gasp!"

"What is it you mean, sir, by the last gasp?"

"Oh, until all other means have failed. For instance, a hand that won't fork over can be left along the road. Same way, little tootsie-wootsies that won't travel—we generally cut them off. But actual cruelty! Bless you, no!"

"And you would threaten such indignities to me?"

"That depends. Until we are sure you are a great deal less valuable to us than we have thought, we would be unwilling to proceed even to such measures. But there are others just as reliable. Those are simply examples. Last time of asking—shell out!"

The coolness of both parties was wonderful, and the conversation, carried on in an ordinary tone of voice, was thoroughly audible to the rest of the passengers; and probably to the balance of the bandits, who were still in hiding.

Sybarita drew herself up more proudly than Speckled Jimmy—who was watching with breathless interest—could have believed possible.

"I have told you the plain, unvarnished truth. I have nothing to give you; I will not move a step. Now, do your worst."

The passengers heard the hat drop to the ground as the outlaw cast it down; then, the clicking of the lock of a second pistol, which, without a doubt, was aimed at some one in the line.

The uncertainty as to who would catch the first shots in case the firing began made the position all the more uncomfortable; and when the captain spoke there was not a man there who was not ready to move.

"Here, you cargo, stow yourselves away again, back in the hearse. Keep your heads cool, your fingers empty, and we're about done with you. Try any frills and furbelows, and the shooting begins. One at a time, file off!"

"You, my dear, will stay as you are."

Whatever may have been their desire to assist the young lady, the passengers did not hesitate. The time for resistance did not seem propitious. One by one they took up their march for the coach, their hands still elevated.

"Remember, you may take a shot at me if you choose to run the risk of hitting the young lady; but, at the first flash, my men will fill that hearse fuller of holes than a skimmer."

Once satisfied that his order would be obeyed, the road agent dropped one of his pistols back to his belt, and stood with a hand ready to seize Sybarita at the very first movement.

Every man jack of the band was on board—at least of those in the late line—and as yet no one seemed to dare to growl, much less show his teeth.

"Now, Billy, crack your whip, or I'll crack it for you."

More sharply than ever spoke the agent, and, with startling swiftness he shifted his hand so that the barrel of his revolver lay right in line with William's head.

Under other circumstances the driver might have demurred, but, suddenly taken off his guard, he brought down his whip, and the chafing team sprang away.

The movement made by Sabarita just then was precisely the one which was unexpected.

Instead of wasting strength in unavailing lamentation, or frantic endeavor to rush forward, she stepped obliquely backwards, actually brushing the shoulder of the road agent as she went.

And then, up from the centre of the road, from the very spot over which the coach had been standing, flamed a shot, and the outlaw, clapping his hand to his side, staggered backward, dropping his pistol as he went, and finally surging heavily to the ground.

Almost at the very instant Sybarita threw herself alongside of him; and by the movement made it pretty sure no shots from the other outlaws would be fired at her, at least.

Edgar Courtney had fired that one shot. Under the coach he had been quietly biding his time.

Scarcely had his finger pulled the trigger when he rolled backwards like an animated cartwheel, and in an instant was hidden from sight at the edge of the trail. This action had been so unexpected and rapid that not a shot was fired in his direction; but out from their covert rushed the hidden outlaws, swarming towards the spot.

There had been a distant clatter of horse's feet, which no one had noticed since the departing stage instinctively accounted for it. Now, a horse and rider burst into view, coming recklessly along the trail.

"Hands up there, yourselves!" he shouted.

"Warp it to them, boyees! We got 'em in a box, and the hearse won't be able to carry just their scalp locks! Stay by me, lads, and we'll clean 'em out, root and branch!"

Shouting thus as he came, his hand flew up, and, without lingering a second, on his aim, he dropped the farthest man from him.

This was an object lesson, and the spiteful bark of the pistol seemed to produce a panic. The wounded captain had staggered to his feet, and now gave a signal, which was probably the only one his men would have obeyed.

They closed around him, supporting him between two of their number, and almost in the twinkling of an eye all had vanished.

The horseman darted straight on a few paces, then wheeled.

"Up!" he shouted, bending low in his saddle to swing Sybarita before him. Then, with Edgar Courtney holding to a stirrup leather, he returned on his trail at almost as reckless a pace as he had come.

CHAPTER VIII. SOLID GRATITUDE.

For perhaps a quarter of a mile the rush continued.

Then, the stage came in sight, halted by the roadside, whilst Speckled Jimmy and the greater part of the passengers were coming back, with the professor actually in the lead.

They set up a shout at seeing their services as rescuers were not needed; and in a moment more the stranger, with the two Courtneys under his charge, drew up in the midst of them.

Edgar was breathing hard after his run, but he held up his hands for Sybarita as she sprang down, and at the same time caught the eyes of the stranger gazing curiously at them.

"Easy, little man, just so easy. You don't want to take too much exercise after a spin like that. You've done a heap sight more than you know, and I wouldn't have thought it was in you. Don't fly off the handle at the last minute."

There was some reason for this advice, for Edgar reeled away almost as Sybarita came lightly to the ground, putting his hand to his throat, as though about to choke.

"Just move along slow and easy, very easy, till you get the pumps working a trifle slower. Don't try to think or talk. Getting over the ground as fast as Bucephalus is enough to break the heart of the average youngster; and I reckon you're new to this sort of work."

The advice was good, and without attempting to answer, Edgar Courtney moved on at a slow pace, the young lady by his side. By the time they had reached the stage the throbbing heart had begun to beat more regularly, and though still looking somewhat flushed and uncomfortable, he flung himself back in the seat vacated a short time before.

"No questions, now," continued the horseman. "Get a move on and roll out. Nightking is a bad man to beat, and if he gets his second wind he'll come back on us with a vengeance."

"An' what you goin' ter do?" asked Jimmy, as he saw the stranger turn in the direction whence he had just come.

"Going to see what's been going on, and take a hand in if it's needed. They seemed all to be on footback, but I'll lay you big money they'll be after the hearse by and by, if they don't get a little choking off."

"Fiddle an' bones! which are 'bout ez nigh ez I keer ter kim ter sw'arin' with a leddy on board. An' spose they git in on ther flanks, ez most like they'll come, an' you nuss 'em on ther way back, whar'll we be? An' ef so be yer bound along ther trail ter Ab's, er funder, yer may ez well turn back. Ther bridge are down an' yer got ter take ther old trail ter git there."

"What! The bridge went down?"

"Yer right she did, an' drapped ther old hearse I war a drivin' inter ther kenyon."

"Ah, any one hurt?"

He bent down as he spoke, and peered in through the window. Perhaps he was looking to see if his eyes would light on a dead or badly injured man.

"Not er soul; but ett war all luck an' no judgement. Kunnel Ransom rolled off behind, stayin' safe an' sound on t'other side ov ther drink, an' we got saved by a mirakel. Jack'll be along ter Yaller Dog some time towa'ds mornin' ef ther toll takers don't gether him in. They'll be wuss ter meet than a b'ar with a sore head."

"Aint so sure of that. The youngster inside downed their boss—though I won't swear it was for keeps. He'll want to lay off for repairs. If that's a true bill about the bridge I may as well go along back. Hit 'em up, old man, and I'll drop in behind."

Billy needed no second urging.

In fact, he had listened with some impatience to the conversation.

He could not well refuse to halt for a movement to rescue a lady in the hands of road agents, even though he believed the effort would be as futile as dangerous. Now, he once more cracked his whip, and the coach hurried away, though at that moment Edgar Courtney, had thrust his pale and somewhat anxious face from the window.

As yet he had failed to thank his rescuer as he should; but it was now too late to remedy the oversight, since he was being dropped rapidly to the rear.

He waved his hand, and was answered by a gesture in kind, but the horseman remained otherwise motionless for a time, until at least a hundred yards had been placed between him and the stage.

Then, he gathered up the reins and spoke to his mount, which trotted off, maintaining the distance between it and the coach with more ease than care.

"He will understand, of course," muttered Courtney, sinking back into his seat. "And we will both thank him better, Sybarita, when we reach the town—to which, no doubt, he will return. I am afraid if he had not made his appearance on the scene Yellow Dog would have been treated to a first-class funeral if we ever succeeded in reaching it. Who is he?"

The latter question was asked in a general way, and with a jerk of the head which emphasized his meaning.

"Cain't tell yer much; but I'll sw'ar he's sport frum ther ground up," answered one of the passengers, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Yer right thar," interposed another.

"Yaller Dorg'll jest say yer shoutin'—an' he ain't bin thar a week. Tom's his name—Take-it-easy Tom are ther way he reads it off; an when he gits down ter bizzness that's jest the way he spells it. An', not meanin' any disrespect, I reckon it's mighty lucky he war on board ter chip in ther game. You couldn't a held 'em all dead level."

"Perhaps not, though if it had not been for the presence of Syb—of my cousin—I think I would have felt like making a mighty big effort. It's the first shot that counts in such a scrimmage, and I think I sent mine pretty near home."

The words were rattled off bravely enough, and yet the young fellow ended with something like a shiver, as though suddenly realizing the fullness of their meaning.

"Then it war you ez fired ther fust shot; an' yer downed yer man? Good fur you! Ye needn't let it keep yer 'wake at nights, even ef yer caught Nightking hisself on ther fly. He's bin needin' suthin' ov ther kind, bad, ter happen to him. You seed what sort he war yerself?"

"Oh, I suppose one has to get used to it; but it gives one an awkward sort of wrench when he thinks it over. He dropped right enough; but he scrambled up again, and they led him off. Perhaps he was not as badly hurt as at first I thought."

"Let's hope he war," answered the passenger, who was a rough-looking but honest-appearing miner.

Edgar said nothing. Between the fall of the stage and the attack of the road agents he had considerable to think of, and he lapsed into silence; though the tongues of the rest ran on without ever seeming to tire.

As for Sybarita, she lay back in her seat with half-closed eyes, saying nothing. She had borne the double shock as bravely as the bravest, but her nerves needed a rest, stout though they might be, and she was doing her best to shut out the conversation, and keep her mind on other things.

Of course, all this had not happened without considerable loss of time. Speckled Jimmy was due at Yellow Dog in easy time for the supper, which had been arranged accordingly, and though the driver of the north-bound stage had decided to make the run entirely back to town, he did not expect to fill the schedule. If he was an hour or two late it was nothing more than sometimes happened, and his failure to appear on time might excite a little curiosity, but hardly much apprehension.

Sure enough, when the stage drew up in front of the Eagle, there was no one there in waiting, though a moment later Bob Smith came bustling out—and stopped short in his astonishment when he recognized the coach that had set out for Red Bend.

Before he had recovered from the shock a horseman, who had closed up rapidly at the last moment, threw himself to the ground and flung open the door.

"Here you are, safe and sound, at Yellow Dog. It's not much of a place to look at, but a good one to stay, and Smith will make you comfortable. I may have something to say by and bye, but just now I reckon you want to rustle for grub. So long; I'll see you later."

The sport touched his hat to Sybarita, and threw himself once more on his horse, which ambled away in the direction of Dave Wright's.

A couple of hours later, just as the two were setting out to take a view of the town, the sport was surprised by a visit from Edgar Courtney.

There was some little talk of a general nature before the youngster got down to the real matter of business on which he came.

"Now, see here, sport, there's no use of any foolishness. I know you're in hard luck and need a starter. If it wasn't that you'd drop to my game I'd sit down with you at a table and lose a few hundreds. There would be plenty more where they came from. As it is, I must just face my hand and play the cards as I see them. How much will it take to start you on your feet?"

"Much obliged, but I've got a starter now. All I'm waiting for is a dead sure thing to open with. After that I think I can hold my own if Yellow Dog sports carry the coin."

He showed carelessly his wallet, which did not look altogether empty.

"Glad to hear it, but all the same, you want a little money to burn till the time for that lead-pipe cinch arrives. Sybarita says so, and what she says goes. Here's a hundred you have got to take. I'm not paying for the good turn you did us this afternoon; I'm just talking as one friend to another, and when you have scooped the deck you can hand it back, with maybe more on top of it. By that time we may need it. And if you want more come back on me."

"All right, pard, a hundred goes. For reasons of my own I'll take it, but I hope to straighten out the account before long. We'll say no more about it now, but perhaps it's not the worst investment you ever made. I was just going to take a little toot around town. I suppose you would hardly care to see the sights."

"Don't care if I do," was the careless answer given by Courtney, who had risen, evidently with the intention of taking his leave.

"Where do they keep the largest sized anamiles?"

"Depends on the quality. The Ophir has the tough kind, but I think, perhaps, the Golden Dream will suit you better. I looked in there the other night and liked their style. We'll try it any way."

CHAPTER IX.

THE GAME AT THE GOLDEN DREAM.

The Golden Dream, as the sport had intimated, was the toniest resort in town.

All the large fish went there, though the rougher element was not barred out as long as it behaved itself. Tom Taylor could not have picked a place where a young stranger could see more of Yellow Dog life with as little danger to himself.

Just before they reached the saloon Tom halted.

"You folks hold on a bit, or take a little walk. There's a man I want to see, and I think I spot him now."

Without waiting for answer he hurried on again, but almost immediately turned sharply around the corner of Chet Thompson's store, and made his way back by a different route, coming incidentally upon a man who was slouching along, puffing at a pipe, and who actually started upon suddenly meeting face to face with the sport.

"No time to say much; and I reckon money talks better, anyhow. Sorry I can't reach the principal, but here's your first week's installment, all right."

"Mine crayshus, dot vos a shtart. I dinks you vosh ofer der range by dis time."

"Not yet. They laid it down all right enough, but the little arrangement didn't work. I'm in hopes, by another week, I

can clean up the whole account. If I don't, rest easy, just so easy. I'm mighty good pay in the long run."

"But, say. Dere hash pin losses in ter pishness, und if you could settle der whole amount—"

"Couldn't do it, Barney; not if you threw off a hundred and ninety per cent."

"Vell, den of you would onsure your life?"

"Bless your soul! You're doing that!" laughed the sport, slipping away, leaving Behm to mutter, as he gazed after the receding figure:

"Dot vash so; put ef you stran'sh der gompany it vill go into der han'sh of receiversh. If he contin'ooes so brombtly ter bay, berhaps we can carry him an-nodder veek, put it vosh reesky; holy Apraham, it vosh reesky."

If the sport had heard him he would probably have remarked that the risk was for the other fellows; but Taylor was already some distance away, and in a few moments rejoined his friends. Together they entered the Golden Dream, where things were moving along after the lively fashion usually to be found there when evening had closed in, and the lights were blazing in the chandeliers.

A number of men congregated there looked up as the three entered, but Taylor simply greeted them with a nod all around, and pushed on to the other room, from which came certain unexpected sounds to greet the ears of the young stranger.

The Dream was an all around sort of a place; but its chief glory was something the like of which could not be found for a hundred miles or more. Right in the middle of the room stood a billiard table, and at the farther end was the presiding deity of the establishment, stringing for the lead with no less a personage than Major Hawke.

The table was of the old-fashioned kind; and the game was the old-fashioned four-ball one of caroms and pockets, but there was nothing old-fashioned about the major's antagonist.

She was, in fact, an up-to-date young lady.

Perhaps she was a little ahead of her time, for at the era when Billiard Belle ran the Golden Dream at Yellow Dog the *fin-de-siecle* woman was not so generally in evidence as she is at the present writing.

She was handsome, of course, with straightly cut features, a bright pair of hazel eyes, and short, curly hair that gave her a boyish look. Her lips were red and full, and her figure about the medium height. The peculiar costume she wore was a revision of the "bloomers" originally introduced by the lady whose name they bear, the bottoms of the pants fitting over a pair of patent leather boots of masculine style, but very feminine size.

For half a year this lady had been one of the features of the camp, running the Golden Dream with an easy nerve which, as much as her beauty, was an admiration for the town.

She was equally at home in every game introduced there—and they had played them all—but billiards was her especial vanity, though there were not a dozen of the men who took a cue there with whom she would condescend to play. When she had to give half a string, and then double discount to make an even match, it was hardly worth while to waste chalk and shoe leather.

From the way in which the major handled his cue it was evident he was an expert; and as he won the lead, Edgar Courtney watched his first shot with some interest.

As it counted, the major went along with a little run, and the easy way in which he worked the spheres towards the jaws of the pocket in one corner seemed to indicate there was a possibility of his running out the game. He was in great force, and there is no telling what he might have done had he not looked up and seen the gaze of the sport fixed full upon him.

Hawke would have sworn nothing could disconcert him, yet those cold, scornful eyes, fixed momentarily on his, undeniably did.

He was nursing the ivories now, his cue ball barely touching them, with clicks so faint as almost to be inaudible, and requiring the most exact manipulation.

Was it through anger, or through thoughtlessness? With a stroke just a shade too hard he split the balls, ending his run after a fashion that only two or three understood.

Then Miss Belle took up the game, and having the balls well bunched, in a good position, began to score amazingly, whilst the major chalked his cue from three different sides of the table without noticing the fact.

When his turn came to play there was little chance to count, and though he left the balls, as he thought, "safe," Miss Belle caromed by an all-around-the-table cushion shot which once more huddled the balls together, and she went on with her count. With such skill as her's, there was no particular reason why she should not be able to run a thousand; and at least she never stopped until the last button had been slid along the wire.

"Just too easy for any fun!" she exclaimed.

"If this thing keeps up, I'll have to be giving you odds, which would be too utterly disgusting."

"You can do it, without a doubt," was his somewhat sulky answer.

"I have no business to be playing you even. There's not many of the professionals that can come near you. I'd back you against the best of them, at five hundred points up, pockets barred."

"Oh, no; I'm hardly that good. But, you know, an antiquated game like this is only fit for the backwoods, though it's good enough to break in the natives with. When they are properly educated, I'll introduce another style altogether."

"Do you play?"

Belle turned sharply to Courtney, who answered, with a graceful nod:

"I have punched the ivories in my time, but I'm no great hand at the game. Perhaps my friend here, Mr. Taylor, would furnish a trifle more than common amusement. If he don't object, I think we might just about be able to hold you and your friend here, level."

"I generally play my own game, but for once in a while I don't mind trying a partner, for temporary purposes only. Come, major, don't put away your cue."

"Thanks, but I play for amusement, instruction, or coin. When I can get none of the three I may as well leave my stick in the rack."

"That means, I suppose, that you pick your antagonist with dire discretion. However, you can't lose if you don't bet, and you would hardly do that with a stranger after announcing such a platform."

The smile with which Courtney spoke was worse than a frown, and the major bristled up immediately.

"If the rest of the world was as willing to back opinions with good, hard cash as I am, there would be no trouble."

"Oh, well, as far as a thousand or two goes, if you can point out a reliable stakeholder, I wouldn't mind five hundred points or a thousand, just as you choose."

And as he spoke, Courtney, striking with no great apparent force, sent one of the white balls speeding around the table from one cushion to another.

"Money talks, and when it comes to a show down I guess the half or the quarter of the sums you mention would suit you better. If you mean sporting, put up the dust, and we'll start the balls."

The major placed his hand in his breast pocket, as if to pull out his wallet, but Courtney was quicker.

"Five hundred, a thousand, five thousand—it is all the same to me. I never make a bluff in any game but poker, and when I talk about money it's all waiting."

As he spoke he flashed out a roll of bills, of all sizes and conditions, and began rapidly to thumb over the ends.

"Oh, come," interrupted Miss Belle, "the major can draw on the house to cash his check, but in Yellow Dog a business man don't usually carry an independent fortune around after banking hours. Better bet your small change first. How much shall it be, major?"

"You are correct, as usual. Five hundred is a very pretty little sum to win or lose on a game like this, and if our young friend is agreeable we will proceed to business, and let each one hold his own stakes."

"Great guns, what a haul it would have been for Nightking if he had made the rifle," muttered Take-it-easy Tom, as he saw his young friend nod, and carelessly thrust the notes back into his pocket. "And blame me if I don't think it was safer out there along the trail than it is right here in Yellow Dog."

His words were not heard, however, for the chaff had ended, and the game was now commencing.

Belle led off; the sport followed, and though he did not start the string he left the balls in a peculiarly awkward position for Hawke. He did make two, however, by a scratch, and then went on with a run of a dozen, slipping up on an easy shot.

Courtney stepped up briskly, with an air of easy confidence, and began counting all around the table, making one brilliant, and apparently reckless, shot after another with the certainty that will sometimes come to a player who is on the topmost wave of a marvelous run of luck. When, finally, he failed to connect it was on a shot so easy it seemed the merest tyro could have made it, and his string had turned once around the corner and was well into the second hundred.

There was a buzz among the spectators, who realized they were seeing great billiards, and Billiard Belle's face was a trifle longer as she came up to take her second turn.

Only once around it had gone, and here the game was over a quarter out, for the one side at least. Without seeming to dwell too long, each shot was carefully made, and when she ceased counting she had added very materially to the score.

Then the sport took up the running, and showed he knew the balls by name, even if he had never slept under the table. He had a strong touch, as steady as steel, and could "draw" a ball the length of the table without any apparent effort. He never stopped until the second hundred was turned, and the major knit his brows as he realized what a heavy contract he had undertaken to carry.

So it went around, with seldom a miss, until, after several more innings, in which the balls seemed to run wrong for more than one of them, Courtney finished the game by adding an even seventy-five to the score.

A burst of applause followed from the spectators, who had been more than a little interested, and then, just as Courtney looked up at the major with an easy smile on his face, there came a confused sound from without the building, and a roar from the other room.

Hawke started, looked, listened a few seconds, and then darted swiftly forward.

He was not sure of what he heard, yet he waited for no confirmation, but, raising his cue, at every hazard struck a fierce blow at the chandelier above the table.

Perhaps he had already studied out some such movement for a possible emergency, and so was prepared to make it without failure, for at the stroke there was a crash, and around the table there was at once thick darkness.

Uncertain what might be the meaning of the move, but knowing at once there was something on board, Take-it-easy Tom, as the lights went out, caught Courtney by the shoulder with one hand, forcing him back with gentle yet no uncertain force, whilst there was an audible click from the revolver in his other hand.

CHAPTER X.

EDGAR COURTNEY'S LITTLE MORTGAGE.

"Hush, little one, till we see how the land lies. Maybe he's on the square, and maybe he's most mighty square; but he's the sort that would murder his wife's cousins, and their sisters, and their aunts for five hundred dollars, though it's a blamed public place to be trying it on."

In the babel of sounds arising the soft whisper of the sport could hardly reach other ears than those for which they were intended, but a low hint warned him to be silent, and at the same time the young man was fully alive to the situation.

If it had been one of the ordinary sports of the place who had made such a break, pistols would have begun to talk before the jingle of breaking glass had ceased; but every one seemed to consider there must be some strange reason for the act, and waited to see what was to follow. Nor did they have long to wait.

Above the darkness rose a sharp, stern voice.

"No foolishness here! My men are all around the house, as well as in it, and the first one who attempts resistance dies!"

"Great guns and hammers! It's Nightking, and he's raiding the Dream."

"More like he is after me," retorted Courtney, in answer to the muttered words of the sport.

"I wish I was certain he won't take a notion to call on Sybarita."

"Take it easy; it's all going right up to the present time. Stand behind me, and let me run the thing for both of us. Perhaps he won't see you—if he does it will be mighty unhandy—for him."

"I'm not a quitter myself; but just in a case like this I wouldn't care if I was around to protect my cousin. Couldn't leave by a window, I suppose?"

"Nary window. A screen on every last one of them, and if you were missed on the fly they would catch you on the first bounce. You are a good little man for your weight and inches, but you better lay low, and play to my lead."

"You lead, then, if you understand the game; but hit or miss I'll play a trump wherever I think I see a chance to take a trick."

The two were by themselves, in a corner, and as they were paying no seeming attention to what was going on in the room, and spoke swiftly, they had time to reel it off—though very little to spare.

Just as they heard the muzzle of a Winchester jammed through the screen at the nearest window a flaming fireball came hurtling through the door, and caught on one of the arms of the chandelier, illuminating the table fairly well, and the puzzled group which stood or crouched around it.

There had been some little hitch in the progress of Nightking's affairs, but now he was on deck, and ready for business.

"Gents all," said the same stern voice, "I've taken the other room—if you listen you will see they have all simmered down—but I am aware the stayers are mostly here. There's a Winchester or a shotgun at every window, and two or three of us who shoot very straight are holding the door. It's not likely any or many of you can get away alive if we start in to turn you down. Which is it; fight or croak?"

The answer was a sudden shot in the direction whence the voice seemed to come, but it seemed not to find its mark.

"Thanks for your answer; and yet I'll give you one more chance. Hands up all, and at the next move of that kind down goes the gentleman's meeting house. Major, I think that was your shooter that talked, and my Number Three will keep a close watch on you. If your hands are not up in ten seconds by the watch he will try the effect of five buckshot and a slug."

"Thet's so, boss," chuckled a coarse voice from a window. "Ett's a blazin' good light ter shoot by, an' I got him lined."

The major it was, though he had fired from under his coat, and the bullet had gone a foot too high, at the very least, to strike a man in the doorway.

His hands went up along with the rest, though if any one had looked sharply, with good eyes, perhaps he might have been able to see the derringer concealed in the uplifted palm.

"Number Four, are all hands up?"

Number Four was at a corner window, which seemed to command the prospect very well.

"Every hand, yer l'udship; an' a heap-sight ov ther knees a trimblin'. Sail in."

The fireball was still blazing furiously, and looked as though it might burn for ten minutes longer, though meantime the dropping sparks were ruining the billiard cloth, and bid fair to set the whole place on fire.

Into the room stepped the same masked robber who had gone down on the trail before Edgar Courtney's revolver.

He showed no mark of wound or evidence of weakness now, though if his flaring sombrero had been raised, and his mask torn aside a little, a mark might have been seen where a ball had just grazed the top of his forehead.

The fact that he had left the townspeople in the room behind him covered by a dozen revolvers, held by half as many masked men, might partially account for his courage, whilst the guns at the windows went for as much more; yet, it seemed a very reckless thing to do.

One man stepping in among a dozen, even though their hands were up, was facing odds of a terrible kind.

The fact was, it was the habit of the seemingly reckless which had given Nightking his reputation and prestige, and he knew, if the rest did not think of it, that the less of their comrades who entered the room the better the men at the windows could get in their work.

"Sorry to trouble you, gents, but times have got so hard out on the road, and business so slack, that we have got to push our collections, and we intend to do it where it will do the most good. At the same time, we don't intend to levy promiscuous and unconstitutional taxes. The house is fair game, and we have already appropriated what money there was in the bank. Miss Belle will be called on for her personal property of monetary description, and the major will be requested to shell out. We've got the biggest part of the game we came to town for, and this other is simply incidental. Where is the fair proprietress?"

With graceful ease flowed the words of the road agent, and he appeared in no haste to come to a close; but with his last question he came to an abrupt pause, and his keen eyes darted like lightning around the room.

The search was a vain one.

Billiard Belle had taken advantage of the delay, and through some unknown avenue, had vanished.

An inarticulate snarl arose to his lips as he turned full on the major, after his fruitless quest, and threw up a hand, for the first time displaying a weapon.

"Gone, has she? So much the worse for you. Out with your contribution, and if it is not a liberal one you'll never be asked to make another."

The deadly cool way in which everything had been done had affected the major.

He knew these people shot to a hair, and never hesitated to make their words good. Moreover, he had just as much regard for his precious life as any man living, though at an even chance, or one a little better than even, he would fight for his money.

"When you take the whole deck you can scarcely ask for more, and I never heard it said that Nightking was a swine. Here's the entire figure."

With that cocked revolver still trained on him, needing but a touch of the finger to send him over the range, Hawke, who was a trifle paler than usual, and subdued in tone, dropped one hand to his breast pocket.

"If you have skinned it over first I want to see what's left before I give my word on that. I know what the size of the pile ought to be; let's take a look at what it is now."

"There's a good five hundred—" began the major in the most matter of fact way.

"Yes, I know. The neat little sum you skinned Harry Leach out of, plus spending money for the evening. Fork it out, and we'll see if it tallies."

"You keep a sharp look out on what's going on in Yellow Dog; but it would be the worse for your spy if he was found out," remarked Hawke, drawing out the wallet, and making a move as though to drop it in the outstretched hand.

"Hold hard, there!" came a short, sharp voice from the corner, and out stepped Edgar Courtney, brushing aside the hand of the sport, which would have detained him.

"I have a mortgage of five hundred on that, and unless the major puts up other collateral I don't propose to see any one else foreclose."

"By the foul fiend!" exclaimed the outlaw, turning promptly and altering his aim; "it's the young bantam of the Red Bend trail, and this time I don't propose that he gets away."

CHAPTER XI.

A CRY FOR HELP.

"Don't you?" drawled Courtney, totally unmoved by the danger.

"If I know anything about the ways and works of such men, you would like to take me alive. And what's the matter with me getting in my work right now?"

The question was a pertinent one, for if each fired at the drop of a hat, it was not so certain that both would not go over the range. Neither of the two could have held straighter, but the chances were really with Edgar, since he had both hands full.

"Alive if I can, but cold meat if I must," retorted the outlaw, dropping his hand with careless languor. "Number Four, have you got him covered?"

"Bet yer sweet chips I hez," came from the only window from which Courtney could fairly be seen.

"Then keep him so till farther orders. If he shoots, drop him at the flash, and throw around to see who is to be captain."

"Meantime, how about my five hundred? That's what I'm interested in just now."

Courtney was as cool as a little icicle.

"And so are we. It all amounts to the same thing. Let the major hand it over, and that will be his receipt in full. As he's a man of sense as well as nerve I don't mind letting him out. If you can keep it when you get it—that will be just 'way up.'"

The major looked from one to the other as if he did not entirely understand the conversation.

"Come, Hawke, you don't mean to say you want to shirk your gambling debts?"

"That's just it. It's a very fresh youngster, and one of these days he may be squealing around the camp unless I pay him twice over. I'd a little rather give you the stamps straight off and know where I was at."

"Drop that gush and do as you're told. Step up to the rack, and give him the boodle. We'll sort out our share when it gets as far as our hands. Move out."

For the first time the face of the major flushed with anger; but, having accepted the situation so far, he saw no reason to change his course, though all the time he was thinking of a hereafter, when Nightking would find the drop was held from the other side.

He fancied matters would not dawdle along just so slow when that moment came.

Anyhow, as Courtney still maintained his position, Israel stepped suddenly and swiftly forward, the wallet in his hand, ready to present to his importunate creditor.

The movement did exactly what the road agent was expecting, for Hawke came between him and the youth.

He was all crouched for a spring, and in another second would have taken advantage of the moment when the drop was no longer on him.

But he counted without taking Take-it-Easy Tom into consideration.

The sport had thrust away his weapons and elevated his digits upon the entrance of Captain Nightking, but he was only biding his time, and suddenly lengthening himself he shot out his fist, catching the major on the jaw, and tumbling him heels over head across to the opposite side of the room.

And then, wheeling like lightning, he jerked out his revolver and fired a shot straight at the spot from which Number Four had answered.

There was a cry of pain and alarm from the window; but high above it rose the clatter of hoofs, and the voice of a woman, who cried.

"Help, Edgar, help! Save me!"

"Heavens!" exclaimed Courtney.

"It is the voice of Sybarita. That comes from having a woman around."

As he spoke he pulled the trigger of the revolver in his right hand, with which he thought he had the captain lined.

He thought—but though Nightking had been there the fraction of a second before, he was there no longer, for, as he saw Israel Hawke dropping away, he changed his scheme and dove under the table.

He did not linger, but as the curling smoke rolled away from the muzzle of the weapon, and partially shut off the view, he darted up like a tiger, and was upon the young man before the latter knew he was coming.

As he rose he threw out his arms to clasp the youngster around the hips, and without pause or sound hurled himself bodily at the nearest window.

Almost at the same instant a load of buckshot tore through the fire ball, scattering it all over the room, and once more plunging the place in darkness, whilst from each of the other windows shot after shot crashed into the room, and a pandemonium of revolver shots sounded in the other apartment.

If the intention was to confuse and dismay the men of Yellow Dog, that purpose was admirably answered.

With so much lead ripping and splintering through the house it would be strange if some of it did not find a human lodgment, and though the sports of the Golden Dream had nerve to the average, they cowered before the storm.

Down, for the most part, they plumped to the floor or under the tables, and by the time they got their own guns out the rooms were clear of the invaders.

And by that time the trouble had begun outside.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TROUBLE WITH SYBARITA.

If Sybarita was left alone at the Eagle Hotel she had no one particularly to blame but herself.

After supper Edgar pronounced himself fresh as a daisy, and willing to see something of what the town was like, but he never would have left his companion if she had not encouraged him.

They had made some inquiries about the man who had so gallantly come to their rescue, and had heard he was a sport who seemed to have hit a hard run of luck.

That put it into the young lady's mind that he might be willing to accept of a pecuniary compensation, or, at least, a friendly loan. As such things are best offered before the heat of the obligation has had time to grow cool, she suggested that if he was hunted up at once he would be found before he had started out on his evening's amusements.

"Not afraid to remain here under Mr. Scott's keeping, are you?"

"Why should I be?" was her somewhat indignant answer.

"You think because I have something of a baby face, and softer hands than the average, because I like my ease, and won't or can't do some things you believe I ought, that I have no courage."

"Scarcely, my dear; but you know—the average weakness of the sex! And then, the newness of what you must think are terrible surroundings ought to

strike terror to your heart. With me, of course, it is different."

As he finished he gazed somewhat admiringly at Sybarita, and gave a mellow, musical laugh.

"Oh, you needn't apologize. You don't think I am half as big a coward as you let on. My being here at all is proof enough of my bravery, and if you can't respect it I may as well go away at once and leave you to look after the confounded mine without my help. So there!"

"Don't get unduly excited, little woman. You could give Moses several in the game and then beat him for meekness; but all the same, if a stranger were to overhear your remarks he might think you were something of a spitfire. So long, as they say in this blessed country, and if any one intrudes, shoot first, and argue afterwards."

With which very sound advice, which, really, he more than half expected would be taken if occasion arose, he went off to look up the cabin of Dave Wright, where he understood the sport was located.

How he found him and then went out to view the town under his guidance, has already been related.

Left to her own devices, Sybarita turned up the wick of the wretched little lamp somewhat higher, and seated herself at the box covered with a newspaper which served as a table.

She was pretty nearly destitute of resources, for nearly all of her belongings had gone down with the stage.

Fortunately, there were a few things in a little hand satchel, to which she had clung with the tenacity of a drowning person, and stuffed in one corner of the receptacle had been a small book which, fortunately, she had not as yet found occasion to read.

The type was small, but her eyes were good, and drawing the lamp still closer she was soon almost absorbed in the printed pages.

Some time had elapsed, though how much she could hardly have guessed, when she heard a slight rustle, that sounded as though it might be in the very room.

Sybarita had not been long enough in the west to know the axiom, never sit with your back to the door when in a place where there may be danger.

She had taken it for granted there would be no intrusion, yet she was certain she had slipped the bolt, flimsy as it was, when left to herself.

Nevertheless, even without the rustle, now that her attention was awakened, she was sure someone was in the room with her.

She did not scream, and it is doubtful if she even gave a start.

Her hand simply stole swiftly towards her bosom, whilst her eyes went up to the little looking glass which hung over the table.

After that there could be no mistake. Crinkled and wrinkled as the distorted image reflected from the miserable little mirror might be, it was the image of a human being; and Sybarita thought that human being was a woman.

That gave her courage; and the solid feel of the little gun around which her fingers were closing gave her more.

"Well?" she said, inquiringly, and without looking up.

"It is not well. You shameless creature! turn around and face me."

At the bitter words, and still more bitter tone, Sybarita did turn languidly, pushing her chair around, so as to face her visitor.

As she had believed, the intruder was a woman; but so muffled up it was hard to say was she old or young, bent or straight, angel or witch.

"Really, I can't see what reason there can be why I should do your bidding except that it may be safer than to have my back in your direction. Have you any business here?"

"Business! No. It is the last place on earth I should be if I wished to have my true revenge—on you at least."

"If you came in here to talk riddles

your visit is badly timed. Call when Edgar, my cousin, is in. He is a master hand at them."

"Cousin! He is no more your cousin than I am. Why do you not call him what he is; or, perhaps the right name would sound too rude to your dainty ears?"

"In the matter of cousinship I wouldn't be too positive. Whilst I have a raft of queer relations scattered around I don't know any bill in that line which you would fill; whilst I have very good evidence that Edgar is the child of my father's brother."

"In the words of—of some novelist: 'I dearly love a liar.' And you—good heavens! It may be true."

The woman had been coming forward with uplifted, threatening hand, but suddenly she halted as the thought struck her.

"Yes, he may be your cousin, but half a truth is worse than a whole lie. No wonder you shrink from pronouncing yourself one of the vilest."

"I do not know that I catch your meaning; or, have you any? Probably you are insane. What connection there can be between vileness and your humble servant is more than I can fathom. Perhaps you can explain."

"Because you have stolen the husband of another living woman. I am Edgar Courtney's lawful, wedded wife."

There was really a world of emotion in the tones of the woman now, and unless she was a consummate actress there was some fierce purpose underlying it all.

One would have supposed that Sybarita, who at heart was emotional, might have been moved.

Instead of that, she stared at the woman while the full meaning of her words dawned upon her, and then threw herself back in a perfect spasm of uproarious laughter.

"Ah, you may laugh now, but be warned. Give him up or—you both die."

"Excuse me, but I really couldn't help it," answered Sybarita, straightening her face by an effort, though the tears still glistened on her cheeks. "You seem very much in earnest, but you are really mistaken about the relations between poor Edgar and myself."

"No, no! I cannot be mistaken—for—I know the man."

"In your mind, perhaps; but as it is certain you do not know me, if you have nothing else to communicate perhaps it might be as well for you to withdraw."

"It might have been better if I had never come. I had some wild notion that perhaps, if you knew the man as he really is, you might have the wit to save yourself before it is altogether too late. Your silly-looking face deceived me. It will only serve as a warning for him."

"My good woman, if I were to take your warning seriously you and I would be at cross purposes. The Edgar Courtney I mean cannot possibly be the Edgar Courtney you claim as your husband. You have been deceived by a similarity in name."

"Then the similarity in person is also very wonderful. I conversed with him this very evening," answered the woman, with a sneer.

"This evening! You must be mistaken."

"No. He was in company with the stranger sport who came in advance. Without a doubt they understand each other, though they pretend to have been strangers."

The statement gave Sybarita a shock in spite of herself, though she would have lacked wit and wisdom if she had not seen there was some mystery behind this if her visitor was telling the truth as she believed it.

She had all the courage of which she had boasted; and in a moment had made up her mind.

"I do not believe you are willfully lying, for I think I can recognize truth in tones when I hear them. Convince me and I will agree to accept your advice. Can you do it?"

"I can bring you face to face with him,

and then unmask. If the truth is not then clear I renounce him forever."

"Will it be safe for me?"

"Safe as though you were in your own room."

"Lead on, then; I will follow you," and Sybarita, throwing on a shawl, without the hesitation of a moment, suffered herself to be led away.

Out into the street she passed, without a thought of danger; and then—with a sudden swoop a man darted at her, who caught her up, flung her to a horseman in waiting, mounted his own animal, and led the way at a furious gallop in the direction of the Golden Dream saloon.

CHAPTER XIII.

PROF. AJAX SEEKS THE BISHOP.

It will not do to lose sight of a character already introduced to the reader—Professor Ajax Budge.

It will be remembered he offered the devotion of a lifetime to young Courtney, who had come to his rescue with a round silver dollar.

That did not prevent him from viewing with tolerable calmness the exit of Courtney from the coach when the road-agents made their attack on the stage.

He submitted to the subsequent proceedings like a little lamb, on the principle that as he had nothing to lose but his life he could be truly glad and thankful if that was spared him.

When the stage was subsequently stopped, and a movement begun to rescue the missing passengers, he came to the front; but when they were returned in safety he subsided again, and little more was heard from him until the hearse drew up in front of the Eagle Hotel.

He got out in a leisurely manner, stared at the hotel, and shook his head solemnly. Then, he stalked away in search of a less pretentious place in which to fill the cavity under his waistband, and rest his humble head.

There were plenty of eating houses, and some lodging houses, in Yellow Dog, but he was peculiarly situated, and it was not so much for him to pick out the place which would suit him as it was to find one which he would suit.

As he strode along he looked at the various signs with every evidence of anxiety on his face, and from time to time peered at the men he met. What would have been the end of his search is hard to guess if the unexpected had not happened.

An honest-looking fellow, in a red shirt, coarse overalls, and stogy boots, came out of a building which bore the label, "Boarding."

He glanced up casually; and then halted in evident surprise.

"Great 'possums, professor, who in nashun would a thought ter see you hyer?"

As he held out a great paw the professor shook it, and with some show of warmth; but at the same time there was a sign of uncertainty in his eyes.

"Pardon me if I cannot at once recall your name, but I suspect you are one of the lambs from the little flock I had the blessed privilege of meeting at Purgatory Point a month or so ago."

"Hit ett ther fust clatter, but I'm afeared thar's more ov ther goat than ther lam' 'bout me at jest ther present writin'. Fact are, perfesser, I b'lieve I've purty considerable backslid."

"We are all liable to do that. It is a sad fact we are. I have sometimes had thoughts of backsliding myself, but so far I have succeeded in getting a moral brace on. The family well?"

"Fam'bly! Bless your soul; you're a leetle wanderin'. When yer sees me yer sees ther hull ov us. Don't yer 'member Boney Wilson?"

"Ah, yes, now I do. And so you are living here? It seems almost providential, for I hope I may be able to claim your hospitality for a brief period until I can recuperate financially. Through a strange chain of events I am here penniless, and trusting solely to providence."

"Reckon that's a kinder skimp hold. He's jinerally s'posed ter be spot cash," interrupted Boney, who was listening with sympathetic interest.

"Ah, well, yes, perhaps; but it is the best I can do. I cannot possibly have any other debtor, and it seems no one at all will trust me. Where is your humble habitation?"

"Nine mile t'other side ov Poverty Gulch, an' that's a good fifty mile from hyer. I'm nigh about strapped myself, an' am jest startin' out—got a chance fur a lift to ther gulch in a waggin train, but blamed ef I don't see thet yer get's one squar' feed any how, ef I goes hungry meself. Come in hyar tell I fixes that an' then I'll hev ter leave yer. But ef yer kims down our way, an' starts a meetin', I'll keep yer a week, blame me ef I don't; an' I'm a sinful backslider."

Boney spoke in great haste, and while he talked he was pulling the professor inside of the eating house, which was in reality but little more than a large shanty.

A few words to the low-browed, red-haired man behind the bar and the transaction was arranged. Then Boney took the professor by the hand.

"Jest gorge yerself, old man, an' ett'll be all right with Hank. He's paid fur two lunches, er one squar' feed, an' I'm edvisin' ter take that last. I'm a goat, ag'in, ole man, but I'm ther clean white article. So long. I'm afeared that train'll be pullin' out, an' ef I'm left we'll both starve. Trust in providence—that's jest a high old racket."

Boney hurried off, as though afraid to spare another minute, but as he passed through the door there came back with a chuckle the words:

"Jest a-trustin' perovidence—an' that's me."

Hank eyed the professor with some curiosity. No doubt Boney had given him a startling recommendation; and the proprietor had confidence in his judgment.

"Which are it ter be?" he finally asked, in a gruff but good-natured way.

Ajax stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Would it be too much to begin with the aforesaid lunch, and run it into the square meal if the appetite seemed to justify?"

"Hev it your way. I've had mine."

Professor Ajax dropped into a chair.

There was quite an assortment of edibles, mostly of the substantial kind, prominent being a cold boiled ham, while on the little stove in the corner were sundry pots and pans. Altogether, he could not have struck a more satisfactory place, if, as he had suggested, the appetite would only justify. The appetite seemed to be rising, however, and the more he hesitated the stronger it became. When once he began to succumb, the work was soon done. Before he well knew it his jaws were working in fine shape, and Hank was watching him stow away the elements of his first lunch.

"Ah, I feel better now—almost ready, in fact, to begin on the square meal."

"Sail in. Ther vittals is a waitin'."

"Thank you, I believe I will. But not before morning, though. It will require a night's rest to be able to do full justice to your generous fare. I have made a fair commencement, a very fair one, and I can cheerfully recommend your hostelry."

"Well, ef that ain't gall!" exclaimed Hank, full, nevertheless, of honest admiration, as he viewed the remnants of his ham; and the crumbs which remained to mark the progress of his lunch.

"Say, a barg'in's a barg'in, but I'll give yer a half a dollar ter call it off. Ef not, yer got ter let me fill ther bottoms ov yer boots with sand, an' put in a leetle pack-in' ov cold scraps. Ef you don't call that a squar' meal yer bin a eatin' yer must be holler clean through, an' a slammin' big hole on ther outside."

"Oh—ah! I am afraid there must be some truth in your suggestion. When a vacancy does exist," and he placed both hands sadly on his now protuberant stomach, "it is certainly a weary void. But I will accept your magnanimous offer. It will at least provide me a night's lodging, for which, I am sorry to see, you have no accommodations."

"Hyer's yer half. I'm afeared ef we begun ter swop 'round on a night's lodgin' you'd own ther hull outfit afore mornin'."

"Thanks. Ah—are you acquainted with parochial affairs in this region?"

"The which?"

"I mean in regard to the—ah, segregated saints."

"I'll pass ag'in, pard, an' you kin take ther deck. Never heard ov no sich article."

"There should be a bishop—there must be a bisho"—

"Oh, now yer shoutin'. In course. I knowed him well. Favored you a heap sence yer menshuns him. Brother ov your'n?"

Hank looked up full of interest from the counter, whence he had been industriously flicking the crumbs.

"How truly providence provides. I seem to have been directed straight to the one man who could assist me. Where, where will I find him?"

"You ain't in a hurry, be yer?" asked Hank.

"Verily, in extreme hurry. The night has closed in, and I should see him before he has begun his evening study."

"Don't look ez though it war in ther wood, pard. Ther boys planted him over on ther hill two month ago. I sh'd a thought you'd a heard. Died dead game, 'th his boots on."

The professor looked up swiftly, yet sadly.

"Ah, I think I understand you but too well. Died triumphant, in the line of his duty."

"Ez he onderstood ett, pard, ez he onderstood ett. Happy Steve filled his hand frum onder ther table—it was at ther Gold ov Oh Fur—an' Ben, he called him down."

"Ben? Ben who?"

"Ben Bishop, ov course; ther galoot we's talkin' about."

"Steve ketched ther drop, but that didn't make no difference ter Ben; he jest went wadin' in regardless. Steve got in his work all right ernough; but when ther boys found a 'bug' onder his end ov ther table they got excited an' hung him off hand. An' that's ther way we hed two funerals in one day."

"There must be some mistake; surely, there is a mistake. I do not mean Ben Bishop, but a bishop."

"Never heard ov no other Bishop, but thar war an A. Bagshot—we called him Shotbag Andy, tell he mostly went by that name—but he war in jail at Salida, 'cordin' ter last accounts."

"Never mind, never mind. I see we are on different theorems. Is there no presiding elder, or minister, or leading member of some little flock of the faithful, some congregation of the righteous, who would be interested in my work?"

"Pard, I reckon I ketch on, an' I must tell yer thar ain't. But yer got ther hull deck ter choose frum, an' ef yer cain't sort out a hand ter suit yerself, an' play it alone ag'in Yaller Dorg, you ain't ther sort Boney sed yer war. You kin sot 'round tell yer gits sorter rested, an' that load inside packs down, but ef yer wise yer won't enter in no chin with ther galoots yer sees a droppin' in, onless yer takes yer own risks. See how ther game runs afore yer chips, an' git ther rules ov ther house down fine."

The professor availed himself of the permission. He had the price of a night's lodgings, but was in no hurry to seek accommodations, and understood the value of Hank's suggestions. If his mission to Yellow Dog was to be a success it would be as well to study the nature of its inhabitants while he had the opportunity.

He drew his chair into a convenient corner, tilted it back, and resting his feet on the bottom rail caressed his knees, which now nearly touched his face, looking between them at the men who began to swarm in, most of whom seemed to be something like regular boarders.

He listened to their conversation in a more and more dreamy way, and finally his face fell forward on his knees, and he slumbered.

How long he slept it was hard to say, but he was suddenly awakened by the sound of a pistol shot, and at the same time his head went spinning off his head.

CHAPTER XIV.

PROF. AJAX DEFIES THE LIGHTNING.

When the professor went into the boarding shanty things were as quiet as a May morning, and from the looks of things he did not probably suppose the place was ever overcrowded with customers.

In that there was the opening for the biggest kind of a mistake.

Hank Hardy put on no style, but he knew a thing or two about his business, and was doing as much for the size of his capital as any man in town.

He had about him, personally, the air of prosperous toughness, which even the professor had noted, and he was fully able to cope with any of the hard citizens of the city, though for one of his stamp he was a particularly mild-mannered man, and an ardent devotee of fair play.

This last may be accounted for by the fact that he had figured in more than one of the old-fashioned prize fights, when men fought for two hundred dollars with the bare knuckles, scorned a cross, and never "laid down," though it might be coin in their pockets.

For that reason he was able to secure patrons of all classes, for it is a fact that the quietest of citizens has a desire to look around the tough places of the earth if it can be done with safety. And Hank always protected his patrons if they left the duty entirely to him, and put on no frills.

With the rush came back Hank's assistant, and for a time both were kept busy.

In this way Hank lost sight of the stranger in the corner; and out of sight out of mind. Before long he had totally forgotten his existence.

His customers were not so regardless, though they made their remarks in an undertone, and to themselves. The snoring stranger soon became quite an object of curiosity, and when it seemed not a soul there knew a thing about him a little cloud of suspicion began to hang over the assembly.

"Looks like Long Bill, ez never smiles at a hess but ther durned brute hez ter foller," muttered one.

"Wonder ef thar's a re-ward."

"More like ett's ther chap ez killed his woman an' sot fire ter ther shack, over Austin ways," whispered another.

"Ther lynchers war after him."

"Frum what I've heard ov his looks I should say it war Three Card Bill, ther boss monte flipper. Keep yer eyes skunned ef he brings out his little joker."

"Looks like ther w'ust kind ov a bad man; but, then, looks is mighty deceivin'."

"Thar's a way ter find out that last, an' ef he's got sand in him you'll hear him snort."

Skeeter generally made the rounds of the town when he had nothing else on hand, and he happened here when curiosity was at its height. If there was an opening like this, which seemed to promise a chance to run a bluff game without much danger, he could be depended on.

With careless skill he threw up his pistol and drove a ball right through the top of the professor's hat.

Down came the front legs of the chair to the floor with a crash, whilst Ajax Budge straightened himself like a wooden man worked by wire springs, until he stood upright, towering over the heads of the men before him, and staring at them with eyes and mouth open to their widest extent.

A burst of laughter from the audience greeted the movement. He looked ridiculous enough to laugh at, though more than one knew that if he turned out to be Long Bill, the distinguished horse thief, the laughter would be on the other side of somebody's mouth before long.

"Wh-what is wrong?" he finally gasped. "Who did that?"

The first play generally indicates the nature of a man's game; and Skeeter was satisfied.

He pushed forward to the front and stared at the professor. He stooped, and

looked upward; he stood on his tiptoes and looked downward.

Then he turned to the house and gravely remarked:

"Why, ther blamed thing's alive. Wonder how ett got erway?"

The professor, somewhat recovered, stooped to pick up his hat, and then looked thoughtfully at the hole he almost immediately discovered.

"Dearly beloved," he began. "Compared with my own anatomy the amplitude of this hat is but trifling, yet see how our lives are protected. The unthinking would have said there were a thousand chances to one that bullet should hit me; yet here I stand untouched, and without a hair injured."

"What's that yer givin' us about chance? I slung that lead myself, an' when I pick trigger chance ain't in ett."

Skeeter ruffled up quite prodigiously, standing before the stranger with chest expanded, legs well apart, and the thumbs of his hands hooked in the armholes of his vest. And after speaking he puffed out his checks, cocked up his head, and put on about as much style as a ruffian of his appearance could carry.

It might have been noticed that Skeeter stood just out of arm's reach, and for all his seeming carelessness was watching for the appearance of a gun. Several little experiences in such matters, which resulted disastrously, had taught him not to forget to be on the safe side.

Unfortunately for him he had not taken into account the prodigious reach of the professor, whose eye he had also failed to fix, so that he had no warning of what was coming.

Without the least notice, Ajax Budge lengthened himself out until he appeared to reach half way across the floor. His bony fist shot ahead of his arm, and landed like a pile driver, all over the face of the unfortunate Skeeter.

If a blow like that had hit the side of the shanty it might have upset it. Skeeter did not even stagger, but simply flew through the air until he could fly no longer, and then dropped like a stone at the foot of the wall with which he had collided.

Fortunately there was no one in his way or there might have been half a dozen down. He just missed Hank, who was coming from behind his counter with a club in his hand, and had wasted a little time in getting his pistol from the shelf and sticking it inside the waistband of his pantaloons.

"Hyer, you kids!" he shouted, as he saw a movement which might mean that some in the crowd intended to make Skeeter's cause their own.

"You've hed show ernough fur yer money. That's Perfessor Budge, and a friend ov mine. Tetch him an' yer hev ter walk over us both."

"Perfessor ov what?" yelled half a dozen.

"Pugerlism, I guess, fur I never seed a hotter one fur the nob, not in ther twenty-four foot ring whar they do sich things. But I did think he war a gospel sharp frum some things Boney Wilson war sayin'."

If the professor had been a sharp of any kind he had the chance to be solid with the greater part of that crowd, but he remained for a little in the same position as when he recovered from the force of his blow, staring sadly, now at his fist, and again at the motionless Skeeter.

Then he went forward like one in a dream, and kneeling by the side of the prostrate man, felt gingerly of his neck and raised his closed eyelids with his thumb and finger.

"Ah," he said, rising, "his spinal cord is unfractured, and his pupils remain natural. Throw some water on him and he will be with you once more. But, why did I do it—and how?"

Without another word, even to Hank, he caught up his satchel and marched off with his lips pursed in thought, no one caring to try to hinder his departure.

The evening was farther advanced than he would have believed, and as it was his intention to seek a lodging place at once, he turned his steps toward the Eagle Hotel.

The thought that he might be followed never once entered his head, and it may be he was thinking of nothing in particular, for the professor had a way at times of falling into a fit of abstraction, when everything he did was mechanical.

On his way he neared the Golden Dream. The clatter of a horse's hoofs aroused him from his reverie, and the cry of a woman caused him to dart forward, his long legs carrying him over the ground with surprising swiftness.

As he came up to the nearest window a man who had been standing there, peering in over the barrel of a rifle, suddenly reeled away, while from within he heard the muffled report of a pistol.

The professor did not know what it all meant, but he saw a man was down, and strode toward him, just in time to receive in his arms two forms which came bursting through the screen.

He caught them, but he did not hold them; and wrenched apart by the shock, one flew to the one side, one to the other.

Edgar Courtney lay where he fell, and his quivering limbs seemed to tell that he had been knocked almost insensible.

Not so with Nightking.

He was up on the instant, giving a shrill whistle as he rose.

"Away with you!" he shouted, as the first scattering shots from the men in the Dream began to say they were going to give something of an account of themselves, after all.

Other horsemen were swarming to the spot from other sides of the house, and striking spurs the whole gang burst away.

Just as they started Sybarita wrenched her mouth away from under the heavy hand which was covering it.

The cry may have been salvation to some of the outlaws; but for one it proved destruction. The professor had been staring blankly at what was going on, but he took in the situation and arose to it. He whirled his huge satchel once around his head, and then launched it like a rock from a catapult at the man who held Sybarita in his arms.

CHAPTER XV.

TOM TAKES A SNAP SHOT.

Tom Taylor, having knocked the major down, and shot Number Four of the outlaws, would have been ready for Nightking, but missed him when the light went out, and the room filled with drifting smoke.

Then, too, a man came lurching against him, striking with a clubbed derringer as he came, and, knowing it was the major, he had to double him over his hip and fling him back into the corner, where he would be out of the way.

All this took time; and the panorama outside was changing with wonderful swiftness. When he got to the window he found the outlaws in full retreat, carrying with them their one wounded man; the fellow knocked off his horse lay in the street with a broken neck; while Sybarita had touched the ground but lightly when she fell, and had found her way to the side of her cousin, who was beginning to straighten up.

The professor was just extending a hand, which Courtney clasped and staggered to his feet, as the sport leaped lightly through the window.

"Sure you're all right?" asked Sybarita anxiously, and seemingly more interested in her cousin than she had been in herself.

"It's so reported," came the answer, with an attempt at a laugh.

"But there seems to have been an awful amount of fuss over one small boy. What in high jinks was it all about?"

"Boy, nothing," chimed in the sport.

"They don't make men around here with more sand than you have shown.

If you had only plugged a couple you could have set up right here for a mighty chief, and the town would have said amen. I'll give you the fellow I plugged through the window to put on your record, and as there's blood about somewhere, no one can say nixey."

"Quit your chaff and tell me what it all means—if you can guess."

Edgar was gradually recovering his wits, which had been pretty well shaken out of him.

Still, he could not see things clearly as yet, and was willing to rely on the sport's judgment for the time being.

"It means, Nightking has just raided the Golden Dream, and got away with the luggage—all but the live stock and what little we saved from the wreck. Reckon he thought if he got the young lady he'd have a lead-pipe cinch on the Fairy Belle."

"But Sybarita has escaped!"

"Yes, thanks to the professor. Nightking made a hat full off the bank and the rest of the crowd, and if he could have got the major's five hundred yet, I guess he would have died happy."

"He got that, did he not? I was just reaching for it when the crash came."

"Scarcely. I corralled that myself, and as it's your pile, I'll hand it over. You can see that he gets his right change back."

"Thanks, a thousand thanks! I'll see you don't suffer. But, say! You and the professor escort us around to the hotel. Let on I'm badly used up. I don't want to shake hands with half the camp, and this is no place for Sybarita, whose story we'll hear later."

"Right you are, and it's time we got a move on. They're all coming, right now."

A number of heads were at the window, while some of the sports were hastening around from the front of the house, and others were arriving from the neighboring saloons. It was astonishing how fast the crowd was gathering.

Take-it-easy Tom was the man for the emergency.

With young Courtney leaning on his arm, and Sybarita under the charge of the professor, he made an easy way through the crowd, explaining as he went along, but never allowing his progress to be checked; and as there were plenty more behind him to tell the story with perfect willingness he managed to draw his charges out of the rush without much hindrance.

Once at the Eagle the sport would have retired, but Edgar interfered.

"You have been of so much service to me already I cannot help but feel you are one who can be trusted—and we need some such a one just now, Sybarita and I."

"Bless your soul, when I drop to a man I generally stay with him as long as he needs me, and I'm yours to command; but if I was asked an opinion I'd say you're just as competent to run your affairs as a broken-down sport, or any other man. A little too fresh, perhaps—that's my own failing, don't you know—but then, you have luck to back it, and as long as that same don't run out, it's three washers and a burr on the bolt of destiny."

"Thanks. In one way I more than half believe you, though that same luck only lasts till some one is ready to come to the rescue."

"It's about this way. Sybarita owns the big end of the Fairy Belle, but the working of it was put into the hands of two men in this place—Hawke and Behm. Poor Roger, with almost his dying words, requested her to keep away from here, and trust to the interests of two of the greatest rescals unhung to do her justice. But how could she?"

"Just so."

"There was a mystery as to his death, anyhow. He fell; but who caused the fall? And could any arrangement be made which would prevent those sharpers from swindling the orphan, or at least selling out her interest to Colonel

Ransome, who claims to have some sort of a title to the mine? She hardly looks it, but Sybarita is very firm when she makes up her mind. She did make up her mind, and I'm here to see fair play. From the little talk I had with the major this evening I calculate there is going to be considerable friction; but I'm five hundred ahead in the game, as a starter, and I hope to keep that much to the good down to the final settlement. But this road-agent seems to have a desperate game of his own, and there, perhaps, is where I will need you."

"And there's another woman in the case," interposed Sybarita. "I am not sure that she is in collusion with Captain Nightking, but if she told the truth she is after Edgar Courtney with a very sharp stick. It was through her I came so near to being carried off."

"So you are able to talk about that, are you? Good enough. I was waiting for your nerves to settle. Tell us the particulars."

The young lady looked a trifle shyly at the sport, but then remembrance overcame her, and she smiled loud enough to be heard, whilst she told the story of her adventures as it has already been detailed, just softening a few places a little.

"But you did not hear who she really was?" asked Edgar, who heard it all without a smile.

"She only said she was Edgar Courtney's wife. She did not seem to be either young or old, judging by her voice, and I should judge she was in vigorous health. She was so muffled I could tell nothing about her personal appearance."

"It may have only been a game to separate us, though there are reasons why she thought it was straight goods she was giving you. If she is not a stranger to the camp, it ought not to be hard to discover who she is, and our friend, here, will attend to that at his leisure. To-morrow we will want him to join us in a visit to the Fairy Belle, and in interviewing the wicked partners. When we find where they say we are at we will know better how to act."

"I suspect the major will be hunting you up before that. He was behind the age this evening, and didn't know you had arrived, but by this time I reckon he has caught on."

"Perhaps he has, but I am in no hurry for the meeting. If he don't arrive before your departure, please leave word with them at the office that we have retired for the night, or will as soon as you leave, and can positively see no one."

"Not even Colonel Johnson, who will be the next man to arrive? Don't forget him; and he's going to be a great big factor in the game."

As yet there was no campaign to plan, and after the hint the sport did not prolong his visit much more.

He was anxious to find out what was being said at the Golden Dream, and thitherwards he directed his steps after leaving the Eagle.

"Reckon the youngster is on to the situation about as well as I can post him, and perhaps it may be as well not to say anything about that foolishness at the bridge. They are after me as it is, but if they knew I was on to that there would be no let up at all, and it would take a heap of lead to exterminate their side of the camp. There are some few things I want to know myself before I begin that. When the colonel gets back there ought to be some more developments."

There were some developments to be made, however, before the colonel arrived, and the thread of the sport's thoughts was rudely broken.

He was striding along after his usual careless fashion, scarcely seeing where he was going, or what might be around him, though all the time his trained instinct was ready for action at a second's warning.

He hardly had that second, however.

There was a light thirr in the air, something like a shadowy snake shot

out from the corner of the shanty he was passing, and then a noose was tightening on his neck.

There was no season for warning, and there would have been time only for but one step, yet as the rope tightened so did his finger, as with unerring certainty he wheeled and fired at what he thought was the figure of the man at the other end of the lasso.

Then he was jerked from his feet, and without being able to utter a sound, or make the least effectual resistance, he was dragged towards the shanty, in whose shade the assailants still lurked.

CHAPTER XVI.

A HIDDEN FRIEND.

"Ha, ha!" laughed a coarse, low-pitched voice, as the figure fired at by the sport surged heavily forward.

"Dummy Dick hez got ett whar he lives, just ez I told yer he would, an' mebbe he's saved a better man. It war wu'th ther trouble, jest ter show what sort ov a gerloot yer hed ter buck ag'in."

As he spoke he caught on to the rope, on which two companions were already hauling, and added the force of his own muscles to the strain.

As for the Dick Dummy spoken of, he was simply a rudely constructed effigy, composed of a coat, pants, and a hat, with a little rough stuffing.

Perhaps it had saved some one of the trio from being perforated; at all events it had shown what the sport could do at snap shooting, for there was a bullet hole right where the centre of the breast of a man might have been supposed to be.

"In with him," growled one of the others, "and stop yer chinnin'. Watch out thet Jack don't git back afore we jump the lay-out. Ef he comes be riddy ter give him a swipe afore he gits an eye on ther game. I'll hold ther street an' see ef that cussin' shot is rousin' ther hornets."

The men never lost a bit of advantage, but almost in a single motion twisted the hands of the sport behind him to tie, while they gagged him before he had time to close his mouth and set his jaws.

Then they hustled him into the shanty, and closed the door softly, leaving one of their number on the outside.

It certainly was a very neat operation, and the men who carried it out had plenty of nerve.

After the excitements of the night it was hardly possible the noise of the shot would not bring some one to the spot for the purpose of investigation.

At the same time, it would not be difficult to turn attention away from the shanty, and prevent suspicion as to what was within. It was the most improbable thing in the world that any one should ever believe that by searching the shanty an explanation might be found.

The very boldness of the scheme was what gave it a certainty of success.

Half a dozen heads were turned in that direction within a minute after the report of Tom's pistol, but all that could be seen was a man a little nearer, who was peering curiously down the street. It looked as though he was as much puzzled as any of them; and certainly there was no sign of one in trouble. In a couple of minutes more the coast was again clear, and a movement could be made in comparative safety.

Take-it-easy Tom did not belie his name.

When he found struggling to be of no avail he simply rested passive in the hands of his captors, waiting patiently for matters to develop and the time arrive for the supreme effort.

The man in the street entered the cabin.

Within all was darkness, but he seemed to know where the sport lay, with a man crouching on either side, gripping his shoulders.

"Now, sonny, thar ain't no need ter tell yer we got yer foul; an' et ain't scarcely wuth tellin' we intends ter keep yer, dead or alive. The boss said, bring yer, an' we means ter do ett, one way er t'other. Ef yer chooses ter waggin along on yer own hind legs, like a free-born

white man, yer got ther chaince. Ef yer allows ter give trouble all I got ter say is, we'll never answer a word, but jest sink a bit of steel betwixt yer shoulders an' stop et afore ett right begins. Ef yer riddy rise right up an' step out. Keep hold, boyees, tell we sees how ther nag are goin' ter trot. Ef Nightking don't like ther way we's runnin' this bizziness let him work ther trick hisself."

The fellow took pains to make it all clear enough, and Tom understood the platform without the least need of further questions, or any answer from himself.

One of his captors slightly assisted him, and he rose to his feet.

Without further delay he was escorted from the cabin, around which they passed. On either side a man had hold of an elbow, whilst the third walked at his back, though at the moment of leaving the doorway he had showed Tom the huge knife he held.

The sport had no chance for speaking; but that was no reason why he should not keep up a great lot of thinking; and the more he thought over matters the more unpleasant became the look which they wore.

"Let's see," he mused.

"They can't mean me any particular harm if I don't kick too vigorously, or they would have downed me right in the go-off. A blamed sight easier that would have been than carting me away to catch a knife thrust when they get me out in the tall timber."

"But, hold on. If they had done for me there like as not suspicion would have had a better chance to light on the right parties. This way—from what they have let drop—Nightking is supposed to be behind it all. I'll bet a dollar he hasn't anything to do with it. His share is to be the blame. Counfound it, Tom, it does begin to look dangerous."

It was not every man who would have been cool enough to reason it out in this way; but the more he thought the more he was satisfied that he had hit on an explanation of the affair.

"Yes," he said to himself at last, "it's part of the plot that put Skeeter on my track; and now they're not going to waste time and lead, flipping at me from long range. I don't see exactly what I can do; but when that fellow closes up from behind I'd better be doing something, for that's the time he will be meaning murder. If I could only get a glimpse behind those masks, so as to jot the faces down for future reference, I could almost die happy."

Before long his eyes became accustomed once more to the darkness, and though the faces were hidden by the black masks covering them he could see that the two men at his sides each carried a pistol in his free hand.

He could see, too, something of his surroundings, and that he was being guided directly from the town to a rugged and altogether desolate region. It was just the spot where a murder might be committed and the body forever disposed of.

A little farther ahead the mountain seemed to rise up in a sheer wall, and on either hand there was uneven ground over which his guides would hardly care to travel.

Surely the end of the journey must come very soon. Perhaps the sport's end would come with it.

The man behind dropped back a little.

He did it very carefully, but the sport had sharp ears, and knew in a moment that he was staring around, probably making sure that the coast was clear.

At any rate, before very long he came on again, and with wonderful caution. This must be the critical moment.

Every nerve of the sport was at its highest tension, yet outwardly he remained as cool as ever, and no quiver of the muscles was allowed to send a warning to the hands which were touching him on either side. His game was to treat them to a surprise at the last moment, and play it for all it was worth.

The feet behind him fell very, very softly, but he could hear them nearer and nearer, and he knew the man was making up his mind to the fatal blow.

Then there was a break in the foot-falls, recognized instantaneously, and Taylor was sure the hand behind him was upraised.

Then!—

From behind a huge boulder a pistol shot flamed out, and the sharp ears of the sport heard the unmistakable sound of a bullet striking flesh, accompanied by an exclamation of pain and alarm.

He was not waiting for more, but suddenly became animated as though by electricity. His foot shot out and tripped the man on the one side. Then he swung around and planted the same foot in the abdomen of the other man, and without waiting to see the result, rushed, head down, at where he supposed the man in his rear would be standing.

Somewhat to his surprise, he was already beating a retreat; and Tom neither cared to follow him, nor to wait for the men he had temporarily disabled. He bounded away along the now clear course, making his way toward the town.

The shot puzzled him. Was it aimed at him, or at the man who was about to strike him down? He was inclined to believe the latter from the rapid way in which the fellow, who was undoubtedly wounded, was getting to cover.

The sport was in no condition to linger, for practically he would be helpless if the two he had overthrown should once overtake him. He ran on, and on, and never halted until, kicking against the door of Dave Wright's shanty, he felt that again he had been in danger, and once more he had made his escape.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SENSATIONAL DISAPPEARANCE.

Barney Behm had been conspicuously absent during the ruction at the Golden Dream, though if that had been noticed it would not have elicited much surprise.

He generally was absent when such things were going on; and it was not often he made his appearance at the same time with his partner.

He had a bunk at the office, and seemed to be more often in bed than anywhere else when the town was pursuing its legitimate diversions.

Some time after Take-it-easy Tom reached Wright's cabin Barney yawned, and yelled lazily:

"Who vosh dere?"

"Open the door, quick, Barney, and keep your mouth shut. I want you."

"Mine crayshus, vot prings you here now?" exclaimed Behm, springing out of bed with a promptness which shook the floor.

"Goom right in. Ish der mine choompt?"

"Blast the mine! I expect it will be the death of me yet. Shut the door and close that shutter before you light the lamp and don't turn it up any higher than you have to. Then keep your blamed mouth shut, and ask no questions."

Barney did as he was bidden. When, at last, the lamp was lighted, he saw that Hawke was standing, holding his right arm with the other hand, and there was a handkerchief wrapped around the limb, through which some little blood was slowly oozing.

"Here, do this up the best you know how, so that it won't show. Don't spare the court plaster, and make a clean job of it. The blasted thing has got to be well by to-morrow morning."

Barney said not a word, but his eyes looked the curiosity he would naturally feel, as he gravely examined the injury, carefully holding the arm over a newspaper, so that any dropping blood might be caught and kept.

He went at it with all the deftness of a practiced surgeon, and it was a fact that his partner could not have found a better man to look after the hurt.

"Dot rosh a fortunate shot," Barney whispered at length.

"Went glean drough, without smack-

ing der pone, undt der pleading dosh not amount to mouch. I dinks I have it all up der straight set."

"It don't feel just so well, but it might have been a heap-sight worse," answered the major, gingerly extending his arm, and testing the flexibility of the joint.

"Don't suppose I need tell you to keep quiet about it. It won't do to have Yellow Dog asking funny questions."

"Ish dere any news?"

"Of course there is. As Ante Abe would say, heaps and slathers of it.

"For one thing, the heiress has arrived. And I've seen the young man who travels with her. If they're two of a kind, they're both screamers. Let me in for five hundred, and I hadn't known him an hour."

"Five hundredt, holy Rebecca! How vosh dot?"

"Oh, billiards. 'Round at the Golden Dream. I didn't know what sort of a snag I was drifting against, and undertook to put on style. He and that blamed sport are thick as thieves, and Belle and I went against them for the half thou. Why, he'd give my ball a bump, chase it around against five cushions, jump over it to hit the dark red, and then throw 'em both in the pocket. And I didn't know who it was until the game was over."

"Dot *icos* a choke, by chimeny. I expose you pay dot five hundredt?" asked Barney.

"I'm not so sure about that. It'll take a committee of Yellow Dog sports a week to make up their minds about that. I haven't got the money, and it's blamed uncertain who has. The chances are largely in favor of Captain Nightking."

"Dot roadt-agent!"

Barney fairly screamed out the words, and Hawke's good hand fell heavily upon his shoulder.

"You needn't let the whole town know it.

"Yes, Nightking raided the Dream, and had a sheol of a time. In the shuffle I lost my wallet—"

"Say, vosh in dot vallet? Vos dose babers dere?"

"Yes, 'dose babers vosh dere,' along with my loose change," answered Hawke satirically, his voice in strange contrast. "I did think for a while the sport had the outfit, but I've about changed my mind."

"Undt, for why?"

"You couldn't understand without more explanation than I care to go into. There's an old saw about the impecunious traveler singing in the face of the—other man."

"Vosh dot his vork?" asked Barney somewhat sternly, pointing to the bandaged arm.

"Not by a blamed sight. You dry up on that. If Nightking has that paper he'll ask us a pretty penny for it; and we'll hear from him before morning. If the youngster has it, we got to get it back again. I ought to have called on the young lady to-night, but I guess morning will be soon enough; and, to tell the truth, I was afraid I couldn't trust myself in sight of that youngster without playing for even. And the sport, too! Curse him, he knocked me from bed to breakfast, and I reckon you can find the mark of his fist on my jaw yet, if you look for it."

"Dot vosh badt for dhe shport," said Barney, gravely.

"Ef he owed me monish I wouldn't wantsh him to pay it up pretty quick. Dere might be droples midt dhe executor ven de leetle pills vosh prought in to him."

"Once in a while you do hit the turn, Barney, and there's no use to try to spring the cards on you. Something of that kind generally means sudden death. But he's one of the kind that luck goes a great way with; and when luck stops probably judgment begins. I wanted to let you know how the game was running in case you had a call from the road-agent. I'll turn in now. We'll have that blamed pair to interview in the morning, and I'd better be getting some sleep if

I want my nerves ready for the strain. Not a word about this."

Hawke touched his wounded arm as he spoke, and then went away, without waiting for any answer.

"Five hundredt tollars! Holy Apraham, but he must bay mine brincibal outd of dot, or it's a gone nest egg. Der one will down der odder, undt I don't know vich vould pe der vorst."

Barney was not the only man who thought the collision with Hawke would be bad for the sport. Tom Taylor understood the situation himself, and there was no need for Dave Wright to try to impress it farther on him.

But Dave could not help giving a solemn warning, and seemed a little hurt when the sport laughed at it, and if he thought Tom would give him a hint of how he came to return all gagged and trussed he was much mistaken.

Though the hint for information was a broad one, Taylor kept his own suspicions to himself. In spite of what Dave thought, he had no positive information to give.

For a little while, however, he was in a brown study over the chances of obtaining some for himself. There was just a chance that some one of the parties engaged in this game—the ins and outs of which he understood none too well—might make an appearance at the Eagle, or do some scouting in that neighborhood. He reasoned with himself that it would be worth his while to be on the ground.

He made up his mind, however, that it would not.

It was not likely that any serious attack would be made on his two young friends; in spite of what had happened to himself, he believed that Yellow Dog would be wide enough to repel any attempted invasion by Nightking and his gang; and, as he expected to be the escort of the Courtneys the following day—which was now not so far off—it behooved him to get a little rest, so as to be at his best.

As Dave was an early bird himself, the two tumbled into bed without farther delay, and soon were sleeping the sleep of honest exhaustion.

The night passed without any farther alarm in Yellow Dog, and the following morning the inhabitants rose without the least suspicion of a certain mysterious thing which had happened.

As has been intimated, Dave's cabin was on the outskirts; and probably there was not one citizen out of a hundred who ever took note of its existence.

This morning, by, a strange coincidence, every man who lived within the longest eye-range noted a strange vacancy in the landscape, as he put his head outside of his door.

Wright's cabin had disappeared bodily; and its two inhabitants appeared to have gone with it.

The debris of the shanty was indeed found something like half a mile away, whither it had been pulled bodily, and then destroyed; but of the men there was no trace whatever, unless they had been carried away on the backs of the horses, whose footprints were found near the spot.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MAJOR'S MORNING CALL.

The Courtneys slept late the following morning.

The journey of the previous day was of itself an excuse for that, and when the adventures of the night were added, the wonder was they should have aroused themselves before dinner time.

The two occupied communicating rooms, and it was finally at Edgar's door that Scott applied his knuckles softly, and when he was answered by a cheerful "come in," he found the occupant up, and just about to come out on an exploring tour.

"Major Hawke, boss at ther Fairy Belle, war 'round couple times, axin' war yet on ther carpet, but I told him you warn't ter be 'sturbed on no account.

He's comin' ag'in. What shall I tell him?"

"That depends on the chances for fodder, and how long it will take to stow it away. I suspect I could get away with at least half an elephant on toast; and Sybarita could make a fair stagger at the rest. How soon can you have it on the table?"

"We're cookin' ov it now. Say, five minnits by ther clock."

"Good enough. Tell the major we'll be on deck, ready for all day, in an hour; and that we regret greatly we can't see him sooner. And, meantime, I want you to send a boy to Dave Wright's cabin and have him ask Mr. Taylor to step around. It's funny he hasn't called before this."

Scott scratched his head, and looked a little puzzled.

"Beggin' yer pardon, Mr. Courtney, but you had better gi'mme s'uthin' easy. In ther matter ov Dave Wright's cabin—thar ain't no sich place."

"What?"

"Fact. Thar war one, ez ther boys are willin' ter sw'ar; but ett's gone, frum stringers ter ridge pole; an' Dave an' ther sport—they's gone with it."

"What do you mean by such a story?"

"It does sound kinder fishy, fur a sack; but ett's gospel true. First off, they war a reeport thet a cyclone hed jest lifted it somewhar over into Old Mexico; but later on they's a sayin' thet some 'un hitched on severial teams ov hosses an' hauled ett down ther trail a mile er so; an' then pulled ett ter pieces."

"And there is no sign of the men?"

"Nary sign; not even a weenty drop ov blood on ther grass. They's mostly givin' Nightking ther credit ov ther job, w'ich I are free ter confess are f'ust class, but thar's no tellin'."

"Say, this isn't one of the yarns you spring on unsuspecting tenderfeet, is it?"

"Nary time. You kin see frum ther winder right whar ther layout war; an' ef you's curious in sich myst'ries you kin go over after grub an' look it up fur yerself."

There was no question but what Scott was telling the truth, as he knew it, and a glance from the window seemed to corroborate his yarn, though Edgar could not be positively certain. The vacant spot in the distance which the worthy landlord pointed out, looked like the site of the vanished building; but there might be some mistake about that.

The disappearance of the sport was a shock; though, as, until the previous day, he had not been counted on to aid in their business, it left them no worse off than before, and perhaps slightly better for the warning.

Scott went off, Sybarita was duly informed, and made her comments, and the pair went to breakfast more thoughtful than ever.

Since coming within striking distance of Yellow Dog there had certainly been enough happening to arouse grave doubts as to the absolute safety of the place for two young tenderfeet.

They started out believing Hawke and his wily partner were the men who would have to be watched, and guarded against, but since they were on the spot, they found the desperate band of road-agents appeared to be taking a very large hand in their affairs, while Colonel Ransome was an uncertain element, that might mean more danger than the rest to the title to the mine, if not personally.

They ate their breakfast in silence, and taking Scott's word for it about the disappearance of the cabin and its occupants, waited for the appearance of the major.

When he came he was just as fresh and smiling as though he had not been through the ructions of the previous night, and been put off two or three times when he was all anxiety to see his clients.

As Scott introduced him in a general sort of way, there was no need to mention his name to the young lady when

he shook hands with her effusively. When he held out his hand to her companion he had on his most cordial smile.

"My dear young fellow, it is hardly necessary for me to say I had no idea of who you might be when we met last night, or we could have worked together without a grain of friction. I was in none of the best of humors to begin with, and then, you see, I had an idea you were putting on style with us savages on the border; while I knew that we do play a strong game, even if we were so scandalously beaten. You are not many grades below a professional."

"Every word truth, and I think you are not trying to flatter me when you say it—though I will own I was in rather an extra happy vein last night. Possibly I should have been ashamed of myself, but I took my partner at a venture, and if he had turned out the chump he might have done I certainly could not have won against you both."

"Not much danger of finding Take-it-easy Tom, as he calls himself, a chump at anything he undertakes, though he has hardly had a chance to give the town a fair specimen of what he can do. Still, he showed off to good advantage last night, and I'm afraid he will have to pay the penalty in the future. They will hardly let him into a game, 'weight for age.'"

"Unless they bar him out altogether I doubt if that will trouble him—though, Scott tells me he is missing this morning."

"Yes, though I would not be surprised if it was some game of his own, from which he will reappear in a blaze of glory. He is rather pyrotechnic in his style. But, pardon me, this is not business. In the first place, our little wager of last night. Captain Nightking interfered with immediate settlement, but had you not disappeared I assure you I would have been ready—"

"Oh, I had forgotten. I suppose I have had the stake in my hands, if not actually reduced to possession. Your wallet is safe enough, and I believe you will find the contents as they were. In the shuffle it came into my hands, and of course I held on to it."

The major started at the announcement. He did not observe that though Edgar was carelessly lighting a cigarette the eyes of Sybarita were on him, with a keen, searching look, that took in his every gesture.

The wallet was lying on the box table, and to all appearance had remained unopened from the time it left its owner's hand.

When, a moment later, Edgar passed it to him, the major opened it with an eagerness he could not hide, and ran over its contents, counting out five hundred as he did so.

The notes he tendered gracefully to young Courtney, who, accepting carelessly, stuffed them into his pocket.

"I might say that the loss of the money would have been a bagatelle; but there are a few papers here which are worth twenty times the amount, and if they had gone into Nightking's hands, he would have seen to it that he drew face value; allowing me, perhaps, a percentage for collection."

"Generous soul. With such a grasping way of doing business I wonder you people don't combine together to freeze him out."

"Easier said than done. When we turn out in force, he glides away like the Irishman's flea. When he comes he strikes us at a disadvantage. Yellow Dog is indignant to-day; by to-morrow it will be thinking of something else. The reward of a couple of thousand for him is hardly enough to insure his extermination."

"Ah. There is a reward, then?"

"As I said. A couple thousand dollars. But in the words of the Rockites, what's that to a man when his wife's a widow?"

"Not much; but it might do for the business expenses of the affair. When

one can find pleasure enough in it for the balance he might think he could afford the amusement."

"If you knew what the work was like you would hardly call it amusement."

"Um! Do you know what hunting the tiger is like—not the tiger of the Yellow Dog jungles, but the striped fellow found in the Bengalese coverts?"

"I am afraid I must plead innocence."

"Well, I do; and it is very fair sport, especially if the fellow is a man-eater. Now, on general principles, Nightking might go on to the end of time and I would not interfere. But when he prowls around my kraal, he mustn't kick if I follow him to his thicket. If he had aught to do with the taking away of the easy sport—who has twice over done me a favor of no mean size—I'll take a hand in, and run him down myself. Dead or alive, I'll allow no man to get away with my luggage."

The major stared at the cool speaker, and had it not been for his own experience of the night before would have been apt to have laughed in his face.

But he knew this cool young fellow had once already backed what he had thought a bluff with good hard money—and won. He noted, too, how the white, even teeth shut down on the end of the cigarette between them, and what ever he might think of the chances for its fulfillment, he believed the vow was made in sober earnest.

"You expect to remain with us for some time then?" asked the major, changing the subject, in order to allow Sybarita a chance to take part in the conversation.

He had known in an instant that Edgar was the one for him to watch, yet he must know something about the heiress, too.

"That will depend something on my cousin's movements. She wants to make sure she understands about the mine, and the possibilities of her income, before deciding on her course. To do that may take a week, or it may take a year. As I am her natural guardian, and have nothing else to do, I shall stay with her. We grew up together, and we are not yet ready to separate."

"I think I will be able to satisfy you in regard to the mine. How soon would you care to visit it?"

"The sooner the better. Now, if you have the time."

"My time is your time. We will have to ride. Horseback is the best way, if you are at home in the saddle."

"The saddle by all means. Sybarita and I have had enough of wheels to last us a month."

"I had hoped so, and so the horses are at the door."

Sure enough, the major had prepared before hand, and in a brief time the cavalcade was ready for a start. Only Edgar jerked off the heavy Mexican saddle and vaulted lightly on the bare back of his mount.

"For a dozen miles or so, on a strange horse, I prefer the smooth hide," he said lightly, and with hands low down, controlled the actions of the nervous mustang, which had turned up the whites of its eyes as he approached it.

"Stiddy, kid!" exclaimed a fellow who had seen him at the Dream.

"That's ther brute ez killed Billy Bates; an' Billy war a buster."

The next moment they were off.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VISIT TO THE FAIRY BELLE.

"What was that the fellow said to you?" asked the major, sharply.

"Some nonsense about this being the nag that killed Billy Bates. I was not acquainted with the defunct William, and so I'm not ready to say he deserved it, but from the way the little lady goes I should judge that he did."

"There has been no such death here. The mare has only been here a week or so, and has gone kindly enough. I know nothing about her, though, and perhaps it would be better if we were to exchange.

Unless you are well acquainted with the ways of the beasts they can give you a very uncomfortable half hour while they are learning their master."

"Oh, your neck is worth as much as mine to you, and we'll chance it as it is. She goes as easy as a rocking chair. Probably she has some particular vanity, and if I don't touch it the trouble won't begin. If it does I reckon I'll be with her at the end."

The major looked troubled, glancing from time to time at the mustang in no friendly way, though the animal was not at all justifying the evil reputation which had been so unceremoniously thrust upon her.

It was a fact that the mare had been at Yellow Dog but a week, and in that time had been as mild-mannered as a May morning, yet—perhaps Major Hawke knew something of her for all that.

So Courtney suspected, though not allowing anything of the kind to be seen. They ambled along as pleasantly as you please, and reached the location of the mine without accident or emergency.

It was pretty evident Edgar knew a good deal about a great many things; but he seemed to know very little about a mine, and Sybarita, if anything, less.

Arrived at the Fairy Belle they both seemed to be disappointed.

There was a shaft-house of the rudest description, a pile of dump, and a hole in the ground.

There was no noise, no bustle, no confusion—and nobody there but themselves to show any enthusiasm. They paused for a moment on the outside.

"Any gold in that stuff?" asked Edgar, carelessly, as he pointed at the debris.

"Oh, yes, of course, or we would hardly be pushing things below."

"One of these days it may pay to work a good bit of it over. Lots of it would show ten dollars to the ton, but it was big money your uncle was after. There was a little spur that payed till it petered out, and that's what we have been running on."

"Ah, it played out, did it?"

"Yes; as I told the agent with my last remittance. You understand, according to the contract, the mine must pay expenses from one end of the year to the other, and after that allow your cousin a certain income. Above that there is a dividend, or below it she is at liberty to sell out, or do what she chooses, at the end of the year. I am good for the expenses just now, which, I own, are not very heavy, and before long I think I can guarantee the dividend again."

"That's hearty. Looks as though Sybarita stood to win, which ever way the cat jumps."

"It may look so to you, but to me it seems as though I had the long end of the string. I am free to confess, when all the items of the contract are considered, that it is more liberal than I would have asked. But Courtney wanted it so, and so he had it. At any time if it seems a change should be made I am willing to allow a new arrangement, though I would not care for the city to know anything of the kind was in contemplation."

"Nor do I think there is," chimed in the young lady.

"So long as it seems the present contract can be carried out in good faith, and with fair profit, I should oppose a change. I did not fix things thus, and I do not care about having a hand in unfixing them. What is there to see below?"

"Nothing very interesting; but you cannot understand the exact situation without looking through the tunnel, and seeing what has been done, and is to be done, while it is being explained."

"It is perfectly safe, I suppose?"

The major laughed as he answered:

"You can be sure of that, for I go down there myself, and I don't propose risking my life as well as that of a dozen men. You have a cool head, and the ladders are not long. If you think it is

necessary I can have you secured with a lifeline."

"I don't think that necessary. We will go down and test it. If I think it is needed coming back I will not be too bashful to call for it."

"All right. The journey will begin in the hoisting box, if you prefer it."

In response to a shrill whistle of the major, made some time before, a brace of stout, smudgy looking men made their appearance from the depths of the mine and the descent began.

To the non-professional eye there was not so much to see, but it was fully an hour before the trio reappeared, none the worse for the sojourn under ground, though Sybarita did look a trifle paler.

"And you say Colonel Ransome will try to give us trouble?"

Edgar asked the question lightly, as though it was rather a matter of amusement.

"Not unless he thinks he has a fighting chance. You see how it is. An old friend by the name of Billy Beedam claims a title over which the Fairy Belle laps."

"Prior title, of course?"

"Yes. He struck it before Roger ever drove a pick; and that's where the trouble comes in. There has been time enough to have the records mixed up, and it's that the colonel counts on to help him out on the job."

"But if the claim is so valuable how does it come Beedam is not in it for himself?"

"Oh, no one would take his word on oath for himself; but when he's swearing for Colonel Ransome, that's a different matter. It could go for what it was worth, and Jack counts on his shotguns and revolvers to help out the affidavits. If it hadn't been for a hitch I suppose the ball would have been open before now."

"Blamed if I believe it's worth the bother. I've got money enough for both, and if this thing is to go back on her, Sybarita shan't starve. If it wasn't that I don't care to throw up my hands to a robber, I'd say, let him take it and be happy. But then, I don't want to throw off on you. There may be something in it, barren as it looks now."

"May! Great Heavens! There *will* be when we hit the vein; and we can't have to go much farther. Ransome knows it, and he'll try and make his fight before we can get there. If I had a couple of thousand to spare, I'd push things harder on my own account, but I'm trying to keep within the contract, and I'll do it if I have to sort over the tailings in the dump all by myself."

"What's the hitch with Ransome, then, that he's not making hay while the sun shines?"

"Well, Billy put up his title as collateral, and has been keeping it alive ever since on the end there's no question about, and about the time the colonel faced his hand he thought he had it sure to get the whole thing, but I reckon Billy asks too much, or something of that kind. Wants to come in on the ground floor. Ransome has been after him—just got back this morning—and I wouldn't wonder if the deal was made at last."

"And how much of all this did Roger know?"

"Everything; and it was just because he did that he put things in our hands. He knew all about the taking of the claims, and could have sworn to the straight truth as no other man, unless it is Billy Beedam, is competent to do. And I guess Billy is hardly giving himself away."

"All right. We won't, either. But all the same it would simplify matters if you were down to pay rock again. Some of these fights take a heap sight of money. Push along the work, and we'll know better what Sybarita is worth when we get there."

It looked as though everything was peace and amity between them, and without incentive for farther delay, they all mounted and set out for Yellow Dog.

Though Courtney's mustang had thrown its head a little nervously at first starting, no one was looking for a break when it came, and it was made like a flash.

Some one discharged a gun near the trail, and on the instant the mare wheeled, ground the bit between her teeth, and was off down a narrow bridle path, bordered by trees, jagged rocks and larger boulders. The race seemed to mean injury at the least, and death when the crash came.

CHAPTER XX.

DOWN IN THE DUTCHMAN'S CHURN.

"Great heavens! The mare is off with him, and he has no chance to stop her. They'll both go into the Dutchman's Churn if I can't overtake them. Clear the way!"

The major appeared to be a good deal more excited than Sybarita, and turned his horse as though he intended to dart away in wild pursuit.

Had he urged him forward, the heavier horse he bestrode would have ridden down the light mustang of the young lady without an effort; but his heels never fell to flank, for Sybarita acted with an energy hardly looked for.

First, she gave one swift glance along the bridle path which her own steed was blocking, and then faced her escort.

"Hold hard, Major Hawke! You try to crowd him along that road and you only make a bad matter worse. The more you follow the harder the mare will run."

"Out of the way!" exclaimed Hawke, more excited than ever, while his horse seemed to crouch for a leap.

"He can't throw himself off without being dashed to pieces; and if not stopped, at the other end is death."

"Thanks, but there is no one better able to face it alone than Edgar, and if you won't listen to reason I will have to shoot your horse."

She spoke with all the coolness in the world, but, as the major saw the hammer of the self-acting revolver she was training on him begin to rise, he metaphorically threw up his hands.

"Have your own way, by all means, and if the boy is lost by your folly the men there at the shaft house, who have seen it all, will at least bear me blame."

"A very healthy boy you will find him, if you undertake to handle him as such. He may come to grief, but I'll see, at least, that he has a chance."

"Perhaps you are right, but we can follow him now without danger. He is already out of hearing."

They listened, but failed to catch the faintest clatter of the tearing hoofs, and assured that they would not still further excite the runaway, they turned sedately into the narrow path, Sybarita in the lead.

The young lady perhaps was guilty of overtrustfulness when she turned her back to Hawke; but there was one thing certain: He could not well get past her, and he would hardly care to shoot her in the back.

As yet there was no evidence that this was a preconcerted thing, though somehow the young lady had her suspicions. It was a little odd that gun should have been fired just when the mare was at the opening to the bridle path; whilst the rapid manner in which Hawke lost his head appeared more than suspicious.

It might well be that this trail ended in some abyss, down which it was expected horse and rider would dash; but, though Edgar had certainly lost all control of his animal, and would hardly dare to leap from its back, the lady had a world of confidence in her cousin, and believed luck would befriend if skill happened to be at a discount.

It was no pleasant path to pick a way along in cold blood.

A mountain goat might have found it all right; but Sybarita would never have chosen it for pleasure; and a great many other young ladies would not have tra-

versed it, on the back of a strange horse, for love or money.

She gave her horse its head, and allowed him to take his own course, with only the gentlest of urging. Here and there it went around a rock which Edgar's mustang had bounded over; now and then it stumbled at some uneven spot which the runaway had passed without notice. The point from which they started was soon shut out from view.

As they advanced the gulch changed into a defile, the way was rougher and gloomier, and before long she could hear, some distance ahead, the sound of falling water, the subdued roar telling there was a waterfall of no mean dimensions.

The path, which had been ascending for some little distance, now pitched sharply down, and stretching across the mouth of the defile she could see the blank, opposite walls of the canyon into which their present path debouched.

She could understand something now of what was meant by the Dutchman's Churn, and, with a start, realized it was more than likely Edgar Courtney was in it.

Though the faint trace of use still continued, yet, if her eyesight was not deceiving her, it hardly seemed possible any horseman could pitch down that trail at a gallop, even, and halt on the brink below.

For herself, she decided that it might be better to go the rest of the way on foot. Looking back as she slipped down, she saw the major had already come to the same conclusion.

It did not seem worth while to wait for him. Her coming now could scarcely do harm, and this was the time to show haste.

Down the ugly pathway she hurried, slipping here, stumbling there, and growing white with excitement and rising fears, in spite of herself.

The noise of falling water had risen into a roar, and, though the cataract was not in view, she imagined she could understand its exact location. The bed of the stream crossed the track of this gulch at right angles, and a little before the intersection, no doubt, it fell down a precipice of no mean height.

So, creeping warily but swiftly along, she came at length to where the smooth rock of the latter part of her journey ended in a sharply cut edge.

As she reached it, however, she saw that, turning abruptly to the left, at the base of the main canyon wall, there was a way along a narrow ledge which seemed practical, even for a horseman; though no one living could expect to successfully turn that sharp corner at a gallop.

Had Edgar tried to do it?

Not far back Sybarita, in spite of the rugged nature of the road, had seen here and there the mark of a hoof, and knew that the speed of the animal had up to then remained unchecked.

Below her lay the Dutchman's Churn, a boiling, seething cauldron of waters, which dropped down the rocks at the right into a huge cylinder, cut there by their weight.

No other sound broke into the echoes of the canyon, and, quivering at last with a terror she could no longer disguise from herself, she crept to the very edge, and looked over into the whirling waters.

As she looked she saw them throw up a dark body, which bobbed into sight and out several times, and then went swirling along in the channel worn for an outlet.

One thing was sure. The mustang had gone down to her death. Had Edgar fallen with her?

She gave a long, searching look at the churning water, and then darted aside, running swiftly along the path by the side of the stream, from time to time glancing downward.

The mustang kept in sight; but there were still no signs of Edgar. He might have been swept out of the Churn before

her arrival, or the body might be held down under the weight of falling water or be caught on some snag beneath.

She knew that unless hindered by some cruel rock she could not expect to overtake the flotsam of the hurrying stream, yet some scarcely defined hope urged her on, until she came to where she could command quite a lengthy view of the stream; and the ledge had widened out into quite a little amphitheatre.

With nothing yet in sight, further pursuit was apparently useless, yet the very fact gave her a trifle of hope. Halting, she put her hands to her mouth, and called shrilly:

"Edgar! Oh, Edgar!"

She listened a moment to the echoes which came ringing back; and then there was an answer:

"A-a-a-l-l right!"

"Where are you?" she shouted, looking this way and that, to see from whence the sound proceeded.

To this there was no response. There was an uncertainty, even, that it was Edgar who spoke, but Sybarita jumped to the conclusion it was, and was in doubt which way to turn, since she had been unable to locate the direction of the sound.

Castling about thus in uncertainty, the major came hastening toward her.

"He is living, he is living!" exclaimed Sybarita, in some excitement. "I called and he answered me."

"Sorry to say it, but you are mistaken in that, at least. I heard your call, and answered myself."

"You infernal old liar!" broke in a third voice, close at hand.

"What rot is that you are giving her? It was my hail she heard. Hands up!"

And into sight stepped Nightking, with three of his masked men behind him, each with a revolver trained on the major.

CHAPTER XXI.

TAKE-IT-EASY SPORT CALLS THE TURN.

Doghole had made no mistake when it gave the credit of the disappearance of Dave Wright's shanty to Captain Nightking and his minions.

It was a very neat job, that seemed to be intended for an object lesson, showing what the town might expect if it attempted to become too familiar with the redoubtable road-agent.

How it came to be accomplished Take-it-easy Tom himself could hardly have explained.

The sport began to feel the need of rest when he got back to the cabin, and though he kept one eye open for a time, yet eventually he went off into a slumber so sound that the discharge of a cannon at close quarters would have been none too much to waken him.

He was conscious, some time in the night, of momentarily rousing from one nightmare into another, when he struggled vainly for a little, and then lapsed into unconsciousness. When he came to himself again he was about as uncomfortable as he had ever been in his life.

There was a cord around his wrists, which were carefully bound behind him; his ankles were fastened together in the same manner, and, to crown all, he was pretty thoroughly drenched with water.

Some one had evidently revived him by using the pure liquid by the bucketful.

Around him all was darkness, his bed was solid rock, and a bundle of rags stuffed into his mouth, and tied there by a stout string, which ran back of his neck, prevented anything but the most elementary sort of utterance.

Where he was, how he got there, and what had become of Dave were all deep mysteries.

He thought that for a moment he heard the sound of retreating steps falling on a rocky path, but was not sure. From a certain heavy feeling of the atmosphere he judged he was in a cave, but whether the darkness surrounding him was artificial or that of night and the walls of rock combined was more than he could say.

What was certain was the plain fact of his being a prisoner.

Thinking the matter over, it seemed that for the present there was not much that he could do, and that it would be the part of wisdom to remain quiet until he could learn whether there was not a chance to know more about his surroundings.

At a simple guess, it still wanted an hour or so of daybreak, and, perhaps, when the sun came up, some of its rays might succeed in penetrating the gloom that hung around. And, as all this trouble would not have been taken if slaughter simply had been meant, he was sure, sooner or later, of a visit from some one.

"Don't know how I'm going to utilize the fact, but, judging all around, I should say it was a mighty good thing I turned in last night with my boots on. When I get down to real business—if they don't overhaul me too thoroughly meantime—it will be hard lines if I don't bring things into play. I seem to be all right up to the present time, and the only thing to do for the present is to take things easy. If I can't do that I've got to take them as easy as I can."

In some such way ran the current of his thoughts, and being a young man with much grit and many resources, he possessed himself in a patience far beyond the reach of the ordinary mortal.

The result was that by and by a subdued sort of twilight began to fill the cavern, which was of considerable extent, and at last he could make out a little heap at some distance, which he had no doubt was his friend, Dave Wright, in much the same plight as himself.

It was impossible to communicate with Dave while present conditions continued, and until the expected visit had been made Taylor did not care to change his position. He threw himself back on the hard rock once more, and again waited.

Appetite began to assert itself, and he fancied that with unlimited range he could even equal the professor at clearing a table, though he had not witnessed the exploits of Ajax at Hank Hardy's eatinghouse.

While he was thinking of this he became aware some one was looking down at him through the eyelet holes of a mask. The man was shod with rubbers, and had approached without a shadow or a sound.

He brought the breakfast which the sport had been yearning for, and after removing the gag, which now was evidently more of ornamentation than use, fed Taylor with his own hands. He knew his business, and was taking no risks.

"Boss'll be in ter see yer by-'n-by, an' yer better talk a straight string, though I ain't sure yer baggage ain't checked, an' him with a free through ticket fur both on ye. I'll fodder ther other ger-loot, an' mebbe, by that time, he'll be along."

"The sooner the better. I'm just yearning to whisper a few dying requests into his pictureful ear—though I won't say who is going to be the dear defunct. Send him along."

The bright audacity of the sport did not succeed in drawing the outlaw into farther conversation. He only nodded and turned away for Honest Dave, who seemed in rather worse plight than his friend. He had not had the previous experience, nor was he accustomed to look at life as a joke at the best.

The food-bearer passed away as silently as he came, and there was an interval of weary waiting.

At length the voice of Dave broke the silence.

"Tom; I say, Tom!"

"Dry up on that, confound you. Keep your tongue for the boss. You can't tell me anything I don't know; and I'm not ready to talk to you yet."

There was a grunt from the man of honesty, and more stillness. It seemed to be hours before a man came slipping in, who approached Taylor with caution.

"Well, young man, have you considered well your latter end?" was his brusque query.

"Scarcely. Up to date it hasn't been exactly in sight; but when I reach yours you'll think an Express train kicked you."

"If so it won't be because I was a confounded fool. As for you, you are nearer death than you realize, though I know it is no use to try to work a straight bluff on a fellow of your stamp. To get down to business; where is Hawke's wallet? It went into your hands last night, and I don't suppose you are blasted fool enough to give it back without a fight for it."

"That's just what, to give a square answer. Otherwise I might have had the pleasure of putting it where perhaps it would do more good."

"Every bit as much good to me, and a heapsight more to you. You want to give me straight goods, for your life is hanging right on that point. Tell me where you hid the goods, and if it pans out straight I'll agree to turn you loose if you give your word to leave the district."

"I've given you the best I had in the shop; crack your whip."

"Young man, I'm sorry to say, you're lying. I heard it from Hawke's own lips, under conditions where there could be no doubt, and he's been in sight ever since."

"That's your say-so, but there's a blamed sight of uncertainty about your dead-sure thing, and I reckon the major has beat you on the draw."

"Not much he hasn't. You're too dead-game a sport to throw up a pot you had once frozen on to. But I'll swear you haven't got it about you; and it wasn't hidden in the shanty, for we took that all apart."

The sport laughed genially.

"That's a whole lot of labor and expense thrown away. I haven't been taking any more hand in your affairs than the law allows, but I give it to you straight that if you've damaged Dave's shack on my account you've got to put it back as it was or I will. And if I start on your trail you ought to know enough about the nature of the beast to understand I'll run you to your hole, and then drag you out."

"In your mind, perhaps," retorted the road-agent, who seemed neither angered nor alarmed at the threat.

"You've got a great head for laying out such nonsense, but as the chances now seem strong that you will never go out of here alive you can shoot off such stuff if it does you any good. I've got too much on hand to try to wring the secret out of you at present. Besides, I have a suspicion I know where the book went to. If I am right I may get it, after all, without troubling you. If I don't, you can look for a little circus this evening, when I get back."

"In which I'll play ringmaster, and you'll play clown. Bring along an audience, as my facilities for doing anything of the kind are limited, and I'll guarantee their amusement."

In this war of words the sport more than held his own, and the stare of the steady eyes which looked at him through the mask only seemed to make him the more reckless.

As he had simply told the truth in regard to the wallet he felt the more like speaking with freedom; and then, he wanted as much as possible to turn away the attention of the outlaw from Dave, and center it on himself.

In this he was not entirely successful.

Perhaps he had gone a little too far, or the outlaw was afraid to risk the temptation which lay in farther badinage with this cool sport.

He made no reply to this last speech, but abruptly passed to an interview with Wright.

This was brief, and probably unsatisfactory.

Dave knew nothing at all about the much wanted wallet, and his tones so plainly told it that he was troubled with but few questions. For a moment Night-

king bent over, carefully examining his bonds, and then he returned to the sport.

"My son, it's a deal safer to kick a tied tiger than it is a loose one, but there is lots of satisfaction in it, anyway. How do you like it?"

He sulted the action to the word, and in a rousing style, but the sport never wined.

"That settles it. You are tied to stay or you would have made a move to tear me all apart. Ha, ha! We'll meet again to-night."

Although it seemed a safe enough thing to do the sport had never dreamed they would be left entirely alone, especially after this last insult.

Yet so it was, and ten minutes later Tom Taylor was getting ready to act.

He listened first to make sure he heard two departing footsteps, and then, without a word, doubled himself up into an animated sort of ball, and rolled over the floor of the cave until he found himself right by the side of his friend.

"Oh, drop it!" he whispered sharply as Dave began to make his little speech.

"I'm running this outfit, and when there's any need for you to talk I'll let you know. This is just too good a thing, and all I'm afraid of is he'll change his mind and come back. Get yourself around here, and see if you can work your fingers."

"Not enough ter open them knots. They was tied ter stay."

"Who's asking you to untie them? Just you run your hand along the inside of my boot, and pick out what comes handy. If you don't know what to do with it I'll leave you to your fate."

It was not quite as easy to do as to say, but Dave managed to get his fingers far enough in the leg of the boot to feel a knife, which the sport carried there in a hidden pocket. By the strangest of oversights his boots had not been searched. Had they once been drawn off, even if they overlooked the pocket the outlaws would hardly have taken the trouble to put them on again.

With that weapon once in his hands Dave was not long in sawing through the cords which Tom held against it; and he in turn was speedily relieved.

"Thanks, Mr. Nightking," yawned the sport as he stretched his benumbed arms. "I think I may say that we will proceed to make it very lively for the boys."

He gathered up several pieces of the rope, glanced around to be sure of the place, and then led the way by a route which took them to a narrow path along the channel of a swift stream, flowing over the bed of a deep canyon.

In time they came to the place known to the reader as the Dutchman's Churn, and just then they heard the sound of tearing hoofs, as the runaway mustang came hurtling down the side canyon.

"Jump!" shouted Tom, throwing open his arms, and bracing himself on the very verge of the Churn.

Waiting until the last moment, Edgar threw himself into the arms ready to receive him, while the mustang, with a shrill scream, went down to its doom.

CHAPTER XXII.

CAPTAIN NIGHTKING STRIKES HARD PAN. When Captain Nightking and his men stepped forward the tableau which ensued was highly impressive.

His coming was so unexpected the major was taken entirely off his guard; and as it was at his head the pistols were leveled, and to him the command to throw up hands was given, he obeyed without protest of outward expression, though inwardly he was raving.

This was the second time within twenty-four hours the outlaw had caught the drop on him, and it looked very much as though the percentage would be kept up against him till the end of the game.

Sybarita was the calmer of the two. One might say she was altogether calmer than herself.

She turned upon Nightking imperiously.

"If your request is addressed to me it is impertinence. I was more complaisant than I should have been at our former meeting, but this thing grows monotonous. You persist in it at your peril."

"My dear young lady, don't agitate yourself, but take pattern from your friend here, who stands like a little lamb. I need not mention that my sole interest in you both is for the coin you carry, or can carry. When I get that you are welcome to go your own ways."

"Indeed, I should have supposed that past experience would have discouraged you. I had nothing then to lose in the cash line, and I have nothing now. Edgar has always carried the purse for both of us—and just now Edgar seems to be missing."

"Edgar will have to find himself very suddenly. I don't intend to put off the general clean-up very long. One moment, however. I desire to have a few words with the major first of all."

"A thousand, if you so prefer; but meantime I hope you will allow me to retire. I have no time to waste on these frivolities."

"You're either blamed cool, or blamed foolish. On your life, as you are. There has been too much of the silken glove in your handling; it seems time you should feel the hand of steel. Attempt to stir and we'll strap you to the spot. Now, major, pass over your paraphernalia, beginning with your tools; and hand them butt end first. I needn't inform you that we are watching very sharp, and if we see a wrinkle in your face we'll put a rip in your shirt bosom."

The sharp order to Sybarita had at least the effect of making her a fixture where she stood, and she assumed an attitude of disdainful waiting.

To a certain extent Hawke seemed to try to follow her example.

The situation was unpleasant, but there was a possibility of making it worse, which he intended, if possible, to avoid.

With a lordly nod of acquiescence he drew out a revolver and dropped it into the hand which was waiting to receive it.

As all the time he stood under cover of a frowning muzzle, with a finger behind it ready to press a little harder on the trigger at the first hasty or ill-regulated movement on his part, he deserved credit for the coolness with which this action of his was done.

"Left the mate to it home, did you?" sharply interrogated the road-agent.

"For once you have made no mistake."

"As this seems to have been a junketing trip, where a brace would make apparently needless weight, I am inclined to believe you. Now, proceed to turn your pockets inside out, and if it's not done in double quick we will have to help you in a way you won't admire."

Again the major was acquiescent.

With an exasperating smile on his face he tumbled out the contents of his clothing until he stopped at the last pocket without having produced anything which could add materially to the wealth of the outlaws.

"Sorry if you're disappointed, but I had my little lesson last night, and so I left my heavy baggage in a good safe place before I came down into this valley of humiliation."

"All the worse for you. Two and Three, take him!"

Without hesitancy the two called on darted at the major, and from either side seized him by shoulder and thigh.

"If we can't have coin we must have consolation. Turn out something worth our while; show us how to get it; or, into the drink you go. Hold him up, lads."

Swinging him between them as though he was no burden at all, the two stepped toward the brink of the channel and held him up so he could see the rushing water below.

"Now then. What's the best you can do?"

"Nothing, curse you!"

"All right. Let him float when I say go. Ready! One!"

The outlaws swung the major forward and back.

"Two!"

"Fire ahead!" gritted the major, gnashing his teeth, and game to the last when complaisance could do no more.

"Three!"

For the last time Hawke swung back, ready for the final cast.

Then there was the report of a pistol, and one of the men loosened his hold and threw up his hands, while the major, slipping from the grasp of the other, dropped to the ground.

Coincident with the crack of the revolver, a rock the size of a man's head came hurtling past Sybarita, striking Nightking full in the back.

Throwing up his hands blindly, he went pitching forward off the ledge and dropped head downward into the stream below.

The fellow who was guarding Sybarita was as much startled as any one by the sudden attack, and in his surprise turned his head to see what had befallen the captain, his weapon dropping away out of line.

He might even have plunged away to the rescue had he not been brought up all standing by a sharp order from the lady herself, which was accentuated by the click of the hammer of the pistol held in her fair hand.

"You, there! drop that revolver and elevate your hands. Only time of asking. Up with them, or down you go."

As she spoke, Sybarita took a swift step or two forward, and the outlaw felt the cold muzzle of her weapon boring into his ear.

This cool woman had bothered him somewhat already; and with such an advantage he knew if she pulled the trigger it was impossible to miss.

Down clattered his weapon.

"Sensible lad. I'll give you just one chance before my friends get away with you. Clear out! The captain is floating away down the stream, and you may rescue him if you can, after you get around the bend and out of sight. If you stop this side I'll shoot you dead."

Sybarita had no use for a prisoner, and her method of disposing of him was as sensible a one as she could have thought of.

He accepted the parole and pattered off without even a thank-you.

As for the third outlaw, he was held helpless for harm under the muzzle of Edgar Courtney's pistol, while the Take-it-easy Sport was knotting around his wrists a section of the very rope he had taken from his own.

The tables had been turned swiftly, and with a vengeance.

"You have turned up at last, have you?" asked Sybarita, coolly.

"I supposed you would be on hand when needed, but I must say this has been a rather trying joke on an unprotected female."

"The major don't seem to have counted for much, and that's a fact, but accidents will happen in the best regulated families, and perhaps he is better than he looks. We have been watching the little game for some time, and I am free to admit I don't see how he could have done much differently. There is one thing sure. He is a gamer man than I had believed, and would have gone into the water without a shudder. What have you done with your man?"

"Oh, turned him loose. I had no particular use for him, and holding him at my muzzle's end made me tired."

"Good girl! Guess that's the best thing we can do with this fellow. We'll have to strip him of his guns, and the one I winged can lean on him while they warble their little songs of thanksgiving that it's no worse. You sabbe, Mister Outlaw?"

"I ain't ez big a fool ez I look jest now, an' ef you kin fix ett with ther boss I'm willin' ter play we're even, an' let ett go. You're mighty bad medercine ter trifle with."

"Any way the boss wants to have it will suit me. Off with you."

The groaning outlaw was not half as badly hurt as he let on, for Edgar had not fired to kill. Having been stripped of his arms there was not much danger in him, however, and he staggered away from the victorious little party without a word.

"Now then, what next?" asked Sybarita, looking around as if in search of more foes to conquer.

"Reckon for the next thing we'll get back to Yellow Dog. We happen to fill a royal flush in the draw, but don't you forget it that if Nightking gets out of the drink alive—as of course he will—this is a mighty unwholesome place to be caged in. I move we start at once, and leave all gush for some other time."

The advice of the sport was too good not to be followed, and they hastened away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE COLONEL GETS BACK.

If Yellow Dog had only known, their entrance would have been a triumphal procession.

Yellow Dog did not know, however. It seemed best to keep the events of the day a secret, and allow Honest Dave and the sport to explain their reappearance as best they could without exciting the city to a dangerous extent.

During the absence of the Courtneys there had been an arrival. A rough wagon, officered by a rougher looking driver, brought the luggage of the travelers in an unharmed condition, and shortly after Sybarita had glanced through the major trunk, supposed to contain her necessities, Colonel Ransome put in an appearance.

As he had formed their acquaintance during the brief time they had journeyed together after leaving Ab Nye's, he had a perfect right to call, anyhow; and as the man to whom they were undoubtedly indebted for their dunnage the Courtneys were willing to show him a little gratitude, as well as considerable friendly greeting.

"Of course, we are sorry for your delay, especially if it put you to any inconvenience," said Sybarita, looking up into the colonel's face after a fashion which would be due apology for any amount of expressed selfishness.

"Nevertheless, it seems quite providential that you were left on the other side. When we expressed anxiety about our belongings that funny fellow they call Speckled Jimmy reassured us. 'Just leave it all to the colonel. He knows what's what, and he'll have it all there if he has to carry it every foot of the way himself.' I hope you didn't quite have to do that."

"Scarcely," laughed the colonel, "though it was just as well I was on the ground. There was another claimant, and you can't think how persistent he was until I convinced him that I held the advantage of position, and shot very straight besides."

"Dreadful! What can you mean?"

"Simply, that when I came back from Ab's with ropes, and ladders, and a few men, to rescue your belongings I found Nightking coming on the ground. By the time he got there I was in the tree. Fortunately, none of our party had left his guns at home, and when Ab came down himself, with his Winchester, the bandits withdrew."

"Oh, dear! Was any one hurt?"

"I have my suspicions, though with his usual good luck, Nightking got away. When I had the chance I didn't feel like taking a sitting shot at the fellow, and when he once understood the situation he soon made his precious body scarce. Since I have heard the account of the raid last night I am rather sorry I did not scoop him when I could."

"Yes, it might have saved some future trouble, though he is a plucky rascal, and ought to be in better business. If he only knew it, his luck ran out from the time he began to buck against me."

Edgar's interruption would have been better understood if the colonel had known what had occurred in the canyon

that day. As it was he felt inclined to set the young gentleman down as decidedly fresh.

He went on with a trifle of warning.

"Don't imagine Nightking is banking on his luck. Of course, he has had a pretty good run of it, but it's industry that counts with him. When he once lays out a plan he follows it right along and keeps at it till he gets there."

"He seems to have it in for us pretty heavy; that's an encouraging view of the case to present."

"Well, I only wanted to give you fair warning, though from what they tell me of last night's racket it seems hardly needed. You are probably in more danger than Miss Courtney since he has the reputation of being gallant to the fair sex, if rather cruel to the sterner."

"Sybarita probably appreciates the distinction; I do not. I certainly would not kill a man for choice, but it begins to look as though, in Western parlance, one of us would have to go up the flume."

"Oh, the chances are rather in your favor since he has chosen to try poaching right in Yellow Dog itself. As a point of pride she will rally around her adopted citizens. Though it seems possible that our financial interests may run contrary, personally you can rely on me when needed for any emergency. You understand, I suppose."

"Ah, yes. Sybarita heard there was some chance of an adverse claim being set up, and that brought us out here to defend the title to the Fairy Belle."

"Not to the whole of the mine, you understand, but only a portion of it, overlapping an older title, which never was suffered to die. Perhaps you do not understand."

"As yet we have not had time to look thoroughly into the matter, but the major was going over the ground with us to-day, and I think I understand the main points at issue. We don't want to fight an unjust war; but we must be very certain it would be one before we give up. I fancy I would like to interview a certain Billy Beedam, who seems to be the important figure in the case."

"He is the all important figure on the opposition, for the claim of which I have spoken really rests in his name, though as a matter of business it was pledged to me as collateral under certain restrictions I have never been able to induce him to alter. He is coming over, and if you think it will do any good I can assure you an interview."

"That is just what we want. You will find us square to deal with, but mighty set in our ways."

Edgar laughed as he spoke, but the colonel made no mistake in his judgment of the young man. Wherever he was from, and however he might talk, the title to the paying end of the Fairy Belle would not be given up without a struggle. And behind him were the partners, Behm and Hawke, who could be relied on to hold out for their interests, if not for those of the real owners.

However soon this apparent cordiality might come to an end the colonel was satisfied while it lasted, though he would have been better pleased if the young lady had come more to the front in the conversation.

While Edgar was the controlling spirit, Sybarita had evidently a mind of her own; and he would have liked to see more of it.

In a general sort of way he was successful, though he did not remain too long. When he went away Edgar laughed merrily.

"Looks as though there might be a chance to end this trouble in more ways than one. Perhaps I'm no judge of symptoms, but I'm inclined to think the colonel has been smitten. If not he's putting on about as successfully as the average man knows how. Eh, Syb? Am I going to loose you after all?"

The question was roguishly asked; but a moment later young Courtney gave a low whistle. He had received no answer, and glancing up saw a queer look in Sybarita's eyes.

"Stranger things have happened, but I tell you, make it a sine qua non that he resides a little nearer a white man's country, and not quite so close to the kingdom of heaven, or—the other place. I'm having an immense lot of fun, to be sure, but I tell you, it's the kind that makes one tired. Imaging one having road-agents every day for breakfast, and the highest flight of amusement a game with Billiard Belle. I'd take professional life on the flying trapeze in preference."

"Nevertheless, you are doing well at it, and before long you can set up for what I believe they call a chief, and no one will want to dispute your title. Never mind about the colonel. We'll see how he turns out. What do you think of the major, now?"

"I think he is an infernal rascal, who would only be too glad to get me out of the road so he could work his wicked will on the heiress. It's a neck and neck between him and Nightking, and I don't know which is the biggest scoundrel."

"All right. I needn't tell you to be on your guard. There is no telling what sort of a game he will try next. That one with the mustang wasn't so slow. All the same, it won't do to quarrel with him yet. I don't see exactly the way to oust him, and unless we could do that, open war wouldn't suit our hand even a little bit."

"Yes. I begin to wonder of what sort is his partner, if, as they say, he is the bad man of the firm. Strange he has not shown up."

"That's the redeeming feature. As they tell me, he never shows up until the last, and then he always kills. I'm going to hunt him up, however. When I once stand face to face with a man it's my own fault if I don't know his sort. Perhaps Barney is not as bad as his reputation."

"I have an idea that Billy Beedam will turn out the worst of the lot. That is the interview I want to assist at, if it seems possible he can be kept within decent bounds."

"All right. I'll see that you meet him. Probably the colonel will find a formidable rival."

"All the same, there will be no stray spouses hunting me up. I am looking for the lady to call again, when you will surely have a chance to meet her. You may have been a gayer Lothario than I have thought, after all."

"I had forgotten. I hope she will declare herself soon. There may be more in this than we have dreamed of, as has been already hinted. Some mysteries are surprisingly simple when they are explained, and this may turn out to be something of the kind."

"What can you, or do you, mean?"

"That is to tell. I do not know myself. The time will have to show."

There was a mystery, sure enough, such as poor Sybarita had never dreamed of.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SPECKLED JIMMY'S PASSENGERS.

For a wonder, another day went around without any very exciting developments in Yellow Dog; and as far as the Fairy Belle was concerned, things remained pretty much as they were.

There had been no stage in from Red Bend; but one was expected along sometime soon. The broken bridge would not be in order for some weeks, perhaps, and meantime the old trail would have to be used.

The two drivers had started out together on Billy's coach, and it was about the time that Speckled Jimmy was on the way back, so that they were beginning to think about looking for him at the Eagle, while the colonel was getting a trifle anxious. It was time he was beginning to get in his work if he was going to fight for the Fairy Belle; and he did not want to begin until a passenger by the coming coach had arrived.

If it had not been for the comment it might have excited, just when he wanted none of it, he would have got on his

mustang and ridden out to try and expedite matters a little.

Jimmy was on the road, however, and as the run had been increased by so many miles he was driving with a prudence he did not always exhibit. The jaunt over the rough and seldom used trail would, he knew, take more out of his horses than twice the distance on the average road.

Of course, it was no great trick to make Ab's on schedule time, and there his solitary passenger refreshed himself at the dinner table.

It seemed just as well for his peace of mind he had not come on the immediately preceding trip, for he was a very unfinished gentleman, viewed by Western standards, his experience, to all appearance, having been limited to regions a good deal closer to civilization.

He asked some questions of the landlord as to the party which had stopped there a few days before, and listened to a repetition of the account of the accident at the bridge, and the subsequent interview between the captain of outlaws on the one side and Ab and the rest on the other.

The story appeared to have a singular fascination for him. He ran his hand through his exuberant locks, which had a slight suspicion of gray sprinkled here and there, and nervously fingered at his spectacles while he listened.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed; "what might not have happened had I not missed the train. Truly, it has been a fortunate escape."

"Preehaps she are, an' preehaps she ain't. Nightking are a pec'oolyer man, an' jinrally gits all ther game w'uth goin' fur. Ter my noshun you'd bin better a-takin' yer chances with ther gang ez got through."

"Ah, yes. But the sight of—of such things, you understand. They would haunt one."

"Better be ha'nted than be a ha'nt yerself. I'll give yer a bit ov edvice, an' won't charge yer a cent. Ef them road-agents mounts yer betwixt hyer an' Yaller Dog, shell out. Ther quicker yer do ett ther leaster chances thar be ov yer stoppin' lead. Nightking'll be croster than a b'ar with a sore head."

"Surely, he would not proceed to extremes with an unarmed man, who would not for the world offer the least resistance?"

"'Pends on how his dinner setts. Ef he's fed good mebbe he'll let yer through, ef yer don't think ther toll are too stiff; but ef he ain't hed no dinner at all he'll eat yer."

"Gracious heavens! And I am alone in the stage. If I even had the moral support of the humblest individual I could face the emergency with more courage."

"Oh, ef ett's company yer yearnin' fur, you're goin' ter hev thet; but mebbe yer won't be so glad an' thankful when yer sees what she am. Thar's ther hearse, now."

The stage rolled up to the door, and the timorous stranger stepped out on the porch.

Then he stopped short. The company he was to have had evidently arrived; and even after the hint of Ab Nye he was hardly prepared for the reality.

A square-shouldered, sawed-off sort of a giant he was; not so very tall, but somehow suggestive of having three or four links yet to let out. He was roughly dressed, even for a vagabond miner, but around his waist was a belt which displayed a perfect wealth of arms; and in his hands he was flourishing a Winchester, and yelling at the driver in a voice which resembled the rumbling of a young earthquake.

"Hell-o, Jim-my! Git a good big brace on. Yer Uncle Billy are goin' along."

"That you, Billy? Ther old hearse kin stand it ef ther kimpany don't kick; an' I ain't puttin' up no fares fur luv ov ole times. That's played. Ef yer can't ante don't kim inter ther game."

"Ett's fur ther luv ov ole times thet

I'm goin' ter pay me passage, but ef ary man but Speckled Jimmy hed sed them words I'd a made him eat 'em er cie. Me, ther ole times rocks, ez driv ther fust hearse ez ever kim inter Red Bank! Ett's jest ez easy ter put a hole through a cabeza ez ett are through a hat. Whoop!"

As he yelled he shot, throwing up his rifle to his cheek, but hardly seeming to take aim.

The bullet sped true, and hit Jimmy's hat a fillup which turned it half way around on his head, while another hole appeared in its brim.

In the parlance of Ab Nye, Jimmy never turned a hair. He pressed his foot a little harder on the brake bar, and perhaps drew in on his reins a trifle as his horses showed a bit of restlessness, but he was cool as an iceberg.

"You quit that nonsense, Billy Beedam, er thar'll be blood on the moon. Ef yer ready ter pay yer freight, an' wants ter go, climb in; an' you, rister man, git a move on. I ain't wastin' no more time. Ett's a long road ter travel, an' no tellin' what breakers we's goin' ter strike."

Billy went in, head first, Winchester, revolvers and all, without the least hesitation; but the stranger did not seem so anxious. He was gasping and gazing with a look of horror on his face.

Ab, who was chuckling at the whole affair, was equal to the occasion.

"You ding-blasted fool, ett's only Billy Beedam, goin' to Yaller Dog on a tear. He wouldn't hurt a bear cub three days old. You climb in an' say yer prayers. Ef yer git thar safe yer won't be shot on ther road, an' ef yer time hes kim ter sashay acrost ther divide, shootin's ez good a way ez any."

He seized the stranger by the neck as he finished speaking, and starting on the jump ran him down the steps and along to the coach, when he caught him up neck and thigh, and cast him in through the open door, full into Billy Beedam's lap.

"Make 'em jingle, Jim, while yer hez ther chance, fur ef yer don't ther blame fool'll git erway."

Jimmy lost no time. Crack went his whip, and the stage rolled on.

Billy did not seem inclined to resent the unceremonious entrance.

He simply lifted the stranger over into the front seat as easily as though he was an infant. Then he put his feet out of the window, settled himself back on the seat, pulled his hat over his eyes, and went to sleep.

For some time the stranger watched him, until finally he began to doze himself. He was awakened by a savage yell.

Billy had drawn in his feet, and was sitting bolt upright, with a revolver in either hand, staring around him in a bewildered way.

"Beg yer pardon, mister, ez you don't look like one ov ther fightin' kind. Must hev hed ther nighthoss, an' thought I was intervin' ther agents. I hev shot in me sleep afore now, an' ett war lucky I didn't git a glimp' ov you tell I hed me eyes open."

"No excuse is necessary, not at all, sir. And in case we should meet these robbers you speak of I will be only too glad of your protection."

"Putt her right thar, an' shake, cle man. You kin hev it, an' Billy Beedam sez ett. I'm jest a he-ole terror when it kims ter sich things."

Further remarks were prevented by the sudden stoppage of the stage, while an instant later Speckled Jimmy leaned from the box and shouted through the window:

"Git yourselves good an' riddy fur him; hyer's Nightking now."

CHAPTER XXV.

A HOLD UP THAT SCARCELY HELD.

As Speckled Jimmy straightened himself up, the well-known hail of the bandits was heard, and the stage stopped instantan.

"Sett that brake and climb off!" was the next order, while at the same time

two men darted in front of the teams and caught the horses by the reins, close to the bits.

"Off goes," was the steady answer, and Jimmy let himself down as coolly as he had done at Ab Nye's, never seeming to recognize that he was covered by several muzzles which were twinkling at the side of the trail.

He noticed the voice which gave him his orders was unfamiliar, so that Nightking himself did not seem to be at the fore, but there was so much the more reason to move promptly.

"Now, then, whar's yer tools? Ef you got ary guns drap 'em, an' drap 'em most mighty keerful."

"Fiddle an' bones! Yer don't s'pose I kerry guns, do yer? What would I be doin' with 'em? Kimpany'd bounce me fust trip ef they knowed I hed sich things. They pays me ter drive, an' ef thar's ary fightin' ter be did ett's ther cargo ez hez ter put ett up."

"We b'lieve yer, me boy. Now, you take a promernade along ther trail, an' don't yer stop this side ov Yaller Dorg. We hev bizzness with this hearse, an' I don't know ez we wants a witness. Scatter yerself!"

Jimmy's hands were already up, and he needed no second bidding.

Billy Beedam was in the coach, and Billy was generally supposed to be dead game. If he got to shooting, Speckled Jimmy could do no good, and might receive a good deal of hurt.

When the driver had got around the little bend, and a couple of hundred yards from the spot, he began, however, to slacken his pace. He had some courage of his own, and a full share of curiosity.

Hardly had he done so when he received a stern order from a man lying concealed by the trailside, and not a dozen yards away.

"Move along. Thar's no foolishness in this, an' ef yer stops ag'in ther next man'll drill yer."

Then Jimmy did move along, and never stopped for the next half mile, though he heard the sounds of several pistol shots, and afterward the lively, cracking of Winchesters.

That the circus had not opened sooner than it did was something of a puzzle to him. He had heard, to be sure, the voice of the miner from the stage, and a few shrill cries from the elderly gentleman, but had been too much interested in his own affairs at the time to pay much attention to them.

Now he tried to patch up the story by the aid of his imagination.

"Great governors! Billy hez jumped ther outfit an' took to ther bresh. Ef he ain't givin' a good 'count ov hisself I wants ter know. Winchesters ag'in sixes are big odds, but ef ary man kin git thar ett are thet same ole Billy Beedam."

"Reckon that did ther work," he added, as another roll of the Winchesters reached his ears.

"Jest ther best way ter go outen ther wet. Fuller ov holes ner a skimmer, an' no kickin' in miz'ry, but jest draw on ther golden slippers an' mount ther stairs 'thout derlay. Them agents ain't throwing all that lead away, an' when they shoots ett means ter kill. Eh, what's that?"

A duller ear than Jimmy's might not have understood; but he recognized the bark of the revolver which followed the rifle shots as coming from Billy's gun.

"Hammers an' guns, but he's went an' gone an' done ett! Didn't I tole yer so?"

Back on the trail arose another clatter, entirely different, but which came sweetly to the ears of the old driver.

It grew louder and louder. He heard the rattle of wheels, and the pounding of horses' hoofs, above which, now and then, arose a loud yell.

He stood in the middle of the trail, watching eagerly; nor did he have long to wait.

Presently the coach came in sight; and the way it came was just a spectacle to angels and men.

The four horses were well bunched together by a master hand at the ribbons, but they were tearing forward at a dead run, while behind them swayed and bounced and jolted the vehicle.

Now it swayed to this side, again to that. Then it seemed to leap a yard or two into the air, while more than once it sharply grazed obstacles where an actual collision would have meant utter wreck.

On the driver's seat, holding on to the lines with one hand while with the other he flourished the whip, hatless, breathless, and apparently wild with excitement, Jimmy recognized Billy Beedam.

At the window, now and then, appeared the face of the stranger, who seemed not a whit less excited.

He stuck his hand out to wave his hat, and as they neared the driver Jimmy heard him shout:

"Hit them again and hit them often. One hundred dollars will I give if we escape the wretches."

A sudden jolt of the coach jerked him in, and probably flung him with force against the other side of the vehicle, but the lash descended all the same, while Billy shouted:

"Cats an' cattermounts! When they says fun an' shakes coin at ole Billy Beedam he's allers around. Roll out, you beauties, roll out! Ett's a long road ter travel, an' we got ter git ter Yaller Dorg afore dark."

Jimmy stepped to one side, and they went by the spot where he had been standing at racing speed. Brake and wrist could not have stopped the teams just then, though Beedam had them fairly under control, considering the pace.

The regular driver did not intend to be left, however.

There was some chance that there would be a pursuit on horseback, and he had no desire to interview the myrmidons of Nightking after a balk.

He allowed the flying wheels to almost graze his side, and then, with a great leap, caught at the boot.

His hands fell on a strap, to which they tightened, and he was swept off his feet, though he still clung to his hold.

One end of the coach was about like the other to Jimmy, so long had he been in the business. He drew a long breath, set his teeth and clambered to the top without much difficulty.

"Say, Billy, you jest done that too slick, an' I reckon yer hev airned yer ride, but yer wants ter stiddy 'em up a bit, an' git ther brake on afore we turns ther hog back. Ef yer tries ter go down ther grade like this you'll jest wreck ther ole waggin."

Billy gave a glance over his shoulder, and the driver had a view of his face.

There was blood on it, which had trickled down from a wound on the corner of his forehead, and there was a wolfish glare in his eyes, though that last changed somewhat when he saw who was at his elbow.

"I ain't drivin' fur ther ding-blasted kimpany; I'm a workin' fur ther galoot inside. Ef you thinks you kin han'le 'em better than me you kin hev 'em, but I ain't offerin' no divvy on ther coin. He's offered me a hundred ef he gits through; an', by glory, he's a goin'."

"Oh, I ain't teachin' my grandmother ter suck aiggs. Yer handlin' 'em about right, an' I ain't askin' fur coin er glory."

Billy gave a grunt; but he was not above taking the advice, and gradually the pace was reduced to a swinging trot, which finally changed to a walk. Though the two looked back anxiously from time to time they could see no one in the trail behind them, and at last they came to the conclusion that pursuit, if there was any, had been distanced.

The road, if anything, grew worse, besides pitching sharply downward, and it seemed just as well that the attack had come where it did. Here any such flight as that made by Billy Beedam could not have helped but result disastrously.

Of course Billy told his story with all the frills and embellishments. Pruning it down in his own mind as far as was possible, the fact still remained that the ex-driver, miner and general raan of toughness had taken a big contract and carried it through, and Jimmy mentally vowed that whatever yarn might be told to Yellow Dog on the subject it would not be so far from the truth that he would feel called upon to contradict it.

When Billy got tired telling it to Speckled Jimmy he handed the lines over and crawled inside to have a conversation with the passenger of the faint heart, who appeared to have come through the affair with no further damage than a few hard bumps and a general jolting up.

When at length the vehicle drew up in front of the Eagle and the two stepped out, the first person who met them was Colonel Ransome, who extended a warm hand.

"Here at last, Billy. It's good for sore eyes. I began to think you had backed out, and wasn't coming at all."

"I began ter think so meself, out along ther road. Thar's another hand in ther game, an' we got ter go mighty slow. You hear me?"

And as he spoke Billy pointed to the blood on his beard, and the wound on the corner of his forehead.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BILLY BEEDAM ASSERTS HIMSELF.

It happened that just as the stage drew up in front of the hotel Edgar Courtney, going out, met Take-it-easy Tom; and the two, having something to say to each other, halted.

Then, naturally enough, instead of conversing they watched the two passengers debark.

They saw the colonel hurry up to meet the first man out, and between that and the remembrance of a description they had heard it was not hard to recognize Billy Beedam.

"Looks as though the trouble was going to begin. The colonel has been waiting for his man, and he seems to have come on the ground at last. Wouldn't have been a bad idea to have hired Nightking to steal him away while on the road. He may make no end of trouble here."

"Yes, if Ransome is able to steer him the way he wants him to go; but from what they tell me he's not the nicest sort to lead. As for being driven—it can't be done. He's just as likely to knock the gallant colonel in the head as he is to give him a final interest to all his right and title in the claim that laps ours."

"Looks equal to anything, and Jack must be either sure of himself, or sure of him, before he would venture far into the fight on his say-so."

"Yes. By the way, what's the matter with our friend, the professor?"

Courtney looked in the direction indicated by the nod of the sport.

Ajax, for the time being at least, had not been doing so badly. He had canvassed the camp pretty thoroughly, and his travelling bag did not look nearly as full as it had done on his arrival. Yellow Dog was not literary in its tastes, and it did not run, especially, to the kind of reading he carried, but as a matter of compliment plenty of her citizens invested small sums for the benefit of the mild mannered man who had knocked Skeeter out in one round, without ever being aware that he was fighting a typical bad man; and then did rather more than a fair share toward rescuing the heiress to the Fairy Belle from the hands of the road-agents. The professor had a gorgeous reputation, though he did not seem aware of the fact.

The result was, he remained at the Eagle; and Scott knew his pockets were so well lined there was little doubt but that his bill would be paid when called for.

He was just returning from a final canvass of the town when the stage arrived, and he halted at some little dis-

tance and watched the passengers get out, and enter the Eagle, with a peculiar look on his face.

Probably no one but the sport noticed it, but he noticed everything; and when he struck something which seemed a trifle odd, wanted to know the reason for it.

"I don't see anything the matter, unless the professor has his wits a little higher in the air than he usually carries them."

"Looks to me as though he was puzzled about something or other, and Billy Beedam is at the bottom of it. The old coon is straight goods, and just what he represents himself, no doubt, but there's a hank about him we don't understand until we see it untwisted."

"Let's go talk to him then. We'll hardly lose caste, considering the circumstances of our acquaintance."

The two went over to Ajax.

He recognized them, of course, though he seemed absent minded more than ever.

"Anything wrong, professor? Hope you haven't lost your pocketbook. This is a mighty bad place for a man without brains or money."

"Excuse me a moment; I was just trying to—to think."

"I should judge that's what you had been doing too much of already. What's the subject of your thoughts?"

The professor put his hands up wearily to his head.

"That is what I want to know. Perhaps it was that man. There is something familiar in the air that puzzles me. Perhaps he is one of my old converts. I have a strange faculty of forgetting them, yet one would think I should remember them best of all."

"Oh, it's all right, Tom. Just some of his nonsense. And if it's not, you can talk to him a week without being any better off."

Courtney was inclined to drop the matter right then and there; but the sport was not so easily convinced.

"Say, professor, that man was Billy Beedam; ever hear of him before?"

Ajax shook his head solemnly.

"At first it seemed as though I had, but now I am sure he is a stranger. Yet, why was I impressed? Verily, there is a mystery in regard to the matter which I would have explained. Strange that I cannot fathom it."

The professor hitched his thumbs in the arm holes of his vest, and with head down moved on into the hotel, while the two went away.

"Say, pard, I take things easy, don't I?"

Courtney laughed at the question of the sport, and then duplicated his answer by saying:

"I should smile."

"Well, then, you won't think I'm losing sand when I tell you to keep your eyes open, and finger on the trigger. They are hatching some sort of devilry, and you will have to hustle to meet it."

"Who's hatching it?"

"That's what I want to find out. I thought maybe the professor could help, but he's moonstruck, and don't know B from a bull's foot. We'll have to wait, and see how it develops."

"I'm more interested just now in finding out what became of Nightking. He seemed to have vanished when the boys from the mine went out to look for him; but has he gone for good?"

For answer Tom turned his thumb over his shoulder.

Some one was talking about Nightking right there; and then, as they listened, they heard an account of his latest swoop.

"Missed again! Didn't I say he might as well go out of business? I suspect he will be free to confess I have been very bad medicine for him."

The little bantam ruffled up as he spoke, and was inclined to put on any amount of frills, but Tom shook his head soberly.

"That answers the question whether

he is alive or not. If he had not come up out of the stream his men would never have made another swoop so soon. Depend on it, he is very much alive, and has not let up on his game—which is something more than we have yet suspected. I wish I knew what it is."

"Let him alone and it will develop. If it don't we can hunt him up and ask him."

"Better ask that wife of yours that Miss Sybarita was telling us about. I may be wrong, but it strikes me the two have some sort of connection, though I don't go so far as to say the mysterious woman was only a stool pigeon."

"I have my doubts whether it was a woman at all. If it was it is strange that Yellow Dog knows nothing about her. Her coming and going was one of the mysteries you read about oftener than you see."

"Well, never mind. Time enough when the trouble arrives. It seems bent on coming our way, but so far we've always held a hand to beat it, and I hope we'll keep on doing so till the end of the game. Let's go to supper."

Tom had boarded at the Eagle since his return, and possibly thought he might hear more concerning Billy Beedam's adventure.

So he did, but not from William himself. That worthy did not make his appearance. When the colonel met him so cordially it was to take possession of him bodily, and though he did not try to prevent a session at the bar with a number of curious citizens, eventually the two went off to the little building called by Ransome his office, where they sat down to a conference. When it came to business Billy was sober as a judge, and just now he seemed very much awake to his own interests.

Their discussion lasted for some time.

"Et ain't no use, kunnel," Billy said, at length.

"I ain't deeding' no Jim Crank claim, not ef I knows meself; ner I ain't sellin' a half interest, ner yit a quarter. I'm a willin' ter give yer a good lease on sheers, but ez fur thet writin' ez I put up fur collat'ral—I'm riddy ter pay up whot's comin', an' then I wants ett back ag'in."

"Come now, Billy, don't try to run that sort of a bluff on me. It's fifteen hundred if it's a cent, and the longest kind of a shot if the Jim Crank will ever be worth that to any one else. It's dead sure it won't be to you. Why, man alive, who's going to buy into a fight with Hawke and Behm just because they struck a blind lead, that petered out before they had time to more than turn around. The Jim Crank hasn't half paid its way up to date, and you know it."

"Ef you got er mil'yun you kin come in," retorted Billy, doggedly.

"Million your grandmother! What you want to be interested in is the fifteen hundred. You'll have to put up or shut up."

"Fifteen hundred goes. Thar's yer spon's, gl'imme ther paper."

Billy slapped down a bulging wallet on the table between them, though keeping it well covered with his hand.

To say the colonel was surprised would be to express the facts but faintly. He had seen Billy only a few days before, and he did not talk like this. He then seemed more inclined to rely on his shooting irons. He certainly had no idea of cashing in at that time.

Perhaps this was only a bluff.

The colonel never hesitated, nor did he allow his bewilderment to appear in his face.

"Billy, you're bluffing. You couldn't raise fifteen hundred to save your soul."

"Mebbe I couldn't, but I'd make a mighty hard stagger to rustle up twice that ter hold on to ther Jim Crank."

"Count it out."

Billy laid a huge revolver on the table by the side of his wrist, and then opened the wallet.

It was bulging out with notes of all sorts and sizes. Some were old and

some were new. Some had been well thumbed, and some were fresh from the bank. No stage play was this.

"Fact, kunnel, I struck a streak an' a man with cash at ther same time, caught four queens in ther draw, and played 'em fur what they was wuth. He stayed by me; an' thar's what frees ther Jim Crank an' gives Billy Beedam a he-ole drunk besides. But I don't drink another drop tell I gits this thing fixed. When I hez my paper back, then I'll jest make Yaller Dog howl, fur one night on'y."

"Sorry for you, then Billy, if you're very dry, for I've lost the paper."

"An' lost yer soul at the same time yer done ett," said Billy, solemnly, as he caught up the pistol on the table and forced the hammer back.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AJAX STRIKES A SNAG.

"Billy, lynch law is a blamed ugly thing, and I've got some friends here who will start the game, dead sure, if you shoot. If you look the matter over, you'll see how it is yourself."

The colonel never even winced before that levelled weapon, though he knew well enough it was a matter of extreme doubt whether he would be allowed to finish the sentence he had begun.

"Kunnel, ther Jim Crank are me one chance; an' ef you plays me foul, an' swindles me outen that, I'd jest ez soon be hung; not ter speak ov ther dead loads ov fun I'll be hevin' while they're a doin' ov it. That's ther way I looks at ett, an' now, yer kin calkerlate. I want that contrack."

"I gave it to you straight, Billy. Somebody's got that paper—Nightking for choice—and I can't give it to you; but I'm willing to give you a receipt. If you get that on record, it will answer the same purpose."

"Ter thunder with yer receipts; I wants ther contrack; an' ef I don't hev ett I'll know ther reason why."

"You know the reason why, because I've told it to you, but I'll go over the ground with you again, and tell it to you slow, so you can understand just the level I've been working on. Dead open and shut, Beedam, they took two thousand in cash when they burglarized my place; and I never missed your confounded bill of sale until yesterday, when I was getting ready for you to turn up."

"An' that's straight goods?"

"Straight goods, and a yard wide."

Billy seemed to be a little uncertain what was the correct thing to do. He fingered a trifle with his weapon, and looked into the cool brown eyes which met his so fearlessly.

"Kunnel, yer a man ov grit, ez plays a middlin' fair game, an' I'll give yer a chance. Write me out yer blamed receipt, an' I'll go ett on that tell thar's a round turn. Then I'll come back on you, an' ef yer don't help me out I'll shoot yer dead. Sabbe?"

"I understand, old man. You've given me a hard hand to play, because you must see after this I will be on the other side. At the same time, I'll be with you so far that no man shall take a title through that confounded contract, I don't care whether he is an innocent holder or not. Here's your receipt."

The colonel had been busily engaged in writing a few lines, and he tossed the paper over.

"Good ernuf fur ther present—when two solid men ov Yaller Dog puts ther names to ett ez witness. Reckon yer won't go back on that, so hyer's yer fifteen hundred."

"There's a little change back. If you'll wait a minute, I'll figure it out."

"Wait tell you gits them witnesses, an' then I'll hev that much ter start on. Ter-night I reckon I'll hev ter blow in my balance."

Billy seemed in no good humor, but altogether took things better than might have been expected by one who knew his peculiarities as well as did the colonel.

He raised up in his chair to go, and the movement brought him face to face with the window.

Swiftly his hand flew up with the pistol which had been so convenient to his grasp during the conversation with the colonel, and without seeming to take aim he fired fairly at the face of a man who was lurking there.

There was a jingle and a crash of breaking glass, followed by a groan, as the spy—for such he seemed—fell heavily to the ground.

For a moment the colonel stood paralyzed.

He had not the least suspicion of who the lurker might be, but knew Yellow Dog would never stand such work as this, and if the man was dead he wanted to be able to show his own skirts were clear.

He thought it all over in just one instantaneous train, and then sprung toward Billy Beedam.

What he intended to do he could not have told, but Billy was watching him, and when within arm's length he suddenly wheeled, and struck out.

Ransome was fairly lifted from the floor, and the top of the table striking him about the knees, he turned a complete somersault.

Without looking to see what had become of him, Beedam went out, and, proceeding straight to the window, bent over the form he found lying there.

"Dead, fur a duckat!" he muttered as the hand he lifted dropped like a dead weight from his grasp.

"And ett's not ther Easy Sport, after all. Blame my pickters! what did I do ett fur? I've got ter leave town tell ther thing blows over, fur Ransome'll give me dead away."

He lingered no longer, but turned hastily, and strode off, leaving the body where it fell. It was not until he had got fairly out of sight that Ransome came out of the office.

He, too, went straight to the body, but he did not do as the other had done, but, stooping, at once raised the seeming corpse from the ground.

He had already recognized the figure of Professor Ajax, and without delay carried him to the Eagle, which, fortunately, was not far away.

By chance, Take-it-easy Tom was at the door as he came up with his burden.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "What's gone wrong now?"

"It seems to have been a little accident, but I can't explain it now. Help me carry him to his bed. He's either too dead to need a doctor, or he'll be 'round soon without one. He's got it in the head."

As the sport had the next bed, there was no trouble about locating the professor, and they had him stretched out in no time, with Tom bending over him, lamp in hand, anxiously investigating what was the matter.

"You can't most always sometimes tell in such matters," decided the sport, after a thorough inspection.

"For choice I would say he was all right, but it was a mighty close shave. Reckon he ducked at the flash. There may be a fracture, but with a head as soft as his seems to be that oughtn't to count for much. Can putty it up, and start him out again with a fresh load of tracts. Still, I don't guess he will be on the warpath for Satan for a day or two. If he has been a man of experience in the past, as I sometimes think, I wouldn't wonder if he would be imagining by morning that he has been on a thundering big drunk and will let it go at that."

"Hush. He is coming around now."

The sport held the lamp closer, and peered anxiously at the face which suddenly seemed suffused with a gush of red; though in reality the change was but very little.

"Say, Billy, don't yer do it. It's blamed low," came from between the lips of the professor. "Goin' back on an old pard like that—who'd a thought

it. But, I say, Beedam, how about the Jim Crank? I won't swear it's over the vein, but it's all-fired likely. Hold on to it like a good fellow till I get well, and then I'll try the stick on it. Bet you a dollar she turns for the bright yellow metal.

"And if she don't turn for gold it'll be water she points to, which is most apt ter be my luck."

"Look here. What's all this about Billy Beedam?" asked the sport, looking over at the colonel with some curiosity, while the muttering died away to a sleepy whisper.

"Had he any hand in this?"

"First; is the old man going to pull through?"

"Of course he will. A little wandering just now, but I'll go you two to one he's on the street within a week."

"Well, then, Beedam shot him for listening at the window while we were talking over affairs. He must have heard Billy's name, and all about the Jim Crank; and Billy and I weren't talking very friendly, either, though I suppose I'm a blamed fool for telling you of it. Guess he had a big mad on; and when he saw the face at the window he just let drive."

"Perhaps that was it; and perhaps he was blamed glad to see that same face there to flip at. Looks to me as though this wasn't the first time those two have met. Well, it won't hurt to get Scott's man-of-all-work to look after him a bit. He was to hold a meeting to-night down town, but I guess his congregation will have to be disappointed. What's become of Billy?"

"Lit out for the tall timber. He has an idea I wouldn't object to seeing his neck stretched, and when he saw my chance, for once, he lost his sand. I reckon he's running yet."

"Well, we'll let it go at that. If the old man don't get worse he's all right, and if he does may as well call in the doctor."

The sport turned away. It wasn't his case anyway, and he suspected the colonel would stay with it all the better if he did not show too much willingness to assist.

"Anyhow," he thought, "this is going to make quite a complication in regard to the Fairy Belle. I think I'll have to post the boss."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BILLY BEEDAM'S JAMBOREE.

"It seems to me we are not making much progress," remarked Sybarita, in a somewhat querulous tone of voice.

"For myself, I can't see exactly what we ever came out here for. These rascals who are running the mine are going along just the same as though we had never come, and so far I have heard no suggestion of how they are to be dispossessed, or what good it would be if we accomplished the feat."

"Take it easy; Syb, dear. We at least have the satisfaction of being on the ground. Moreover, I have just been having a talk with Taylor, and he assures me that the teeth of the colonel have been drawn, and that we have little to fear from him. He has quarrelled with the man who really owns the mine he has been claiming lapped ours."

"What of that? I don't see it will help us. The fellow will only go and get a worse partner, that is all. The colonel has the reputation of being a fighter when the battle is joined; but I assure you I consider there are a great many worse men in the world than he is, and if I had my say I would declare I would sooner take him in on what they call the ground floor if that would end the difficulty."

"I've been saying all along that the colonel was exercising an undue influence on the fair heiress. Why not make him a present of the Fairy Belle, and be done with it?"

"Might as well. He might get the major and his wicked partner out; and

I am sure we can't. The worst of it is, you go on smiling on Hawke as though he was the dearest friend you have in the world, when you know he has tried to kill you once; and if what the sport has hinted at is true, it may be, twice."

"Never mind, Syb. That will all come right in the end. Wait till we catch him napping, as we are bound to. We came to see what there was in that old hole in the ground; and we'll do it if, as Speckled Jimmy would say, it takes a wheel off. So long. I'll see you later. We are going over to the Golden Dream a bit, to have some fun with the boys. Don't get uneasy if you don't see me in again at an early hour. You wouldn't like to go along, I suppose?"

"Get out of this! Of course I would, but it wouldn't be proper."

Edgar laughed and withdrew.

If he had not had good reason for it, he would hardly have left his cousin alone. He recognized that it was treating her rather hardly; but certain arrangements had been made which he was sure would secure her safety during her loneliness, and she had promised faithfully that nothing earthly could again lure her away from the roof of the hotel, without a reliable escort.

The sport was waiting in front of the house.

"I'm not sure but what I ought to send you back," was his remark.

"Somehow, I scent fun in the air; and it may come in even rougher shape than you have been treated to. I've got it in my bones that Billy Beedam came back and found out his friend was not in any particular danger. If he did he will be apt, according to the colonel's story, to take a toot around town, and he is in just the right frame of mind to shoot the first person he meets from the Fairy Belle; and that person might happen to be you."

"I'm paid for," responded Courtney, cheerfully. "Nothing fresh about Hawke, I suppose?"

"Nothing, except that he seems up to some game, or he would have had more to say to you."

Beguiling the way with such conversation they reached the Golden Dream, where they found things in full swing.

Billiard Belle saw them enter with something like a start, and watched Edgar curiously as he went up to the rack for a cue, the table happening to be vacant.

She had been talking to Major Hawke in an undertone, and the two received a nod each from the newcomers, but as they were not invited they made no movement toward joining in the game which began between the sport and his young friend.

In skillful manipulation the sport was no match for his antagonist, though he played a very good game, as such games go. This evening, in addition, he had the balls and the luck. The first game was a very even thing of it, and finally was won by Taylor by a scratch.

In the next, Courtney began by taking a prominent lead, which he held until the middle of the game.

Then he missed an easy shot, and though the most of the outsiders did not understand the situation, Take-It-Easy Tom knew he had gone "all to pieces."

The cause of it he could guess at hearing loud voices in the adjoining room. There had been a fresh arrival, and, cool as Edgar Courtney had always seemed under circumstances of doubt and danger, this was a test he could not evade or meet with success. He had nerves, and under such circumstances as this was bound to reveal the fact.

So far as the sport went, he was case-hardened, and it did not make any difference to him if Billy Beedam, backed by a dozen bad men, was in the bar-room.

In fact, his game became all the better. Recognizing that he held the advantage, he was willing "to play to the galleries," and ventured on some all-around-the-table cushion shots which

really turned out brilliant in their execution.

The wind up of the game was in a blaze of glory. The balls seemed to be well scattered, and the ordinary proficient of Yellow Dog would have thought it pretty fair work to put on the "English" and make a single carrom on the white.

The sport's ball lay near the light red spot, though a little outside of it, and to the left. Courtney's ball was down near the cushion, on the lower side of the opposite center pocket. The dark red was not far off from its own spot, while the light red lay half way between the cue ball and the cushion, and a little to the left.

Tom did not hesitate as to his choice of a shot, nor did he seem surprised at the result of the stroke. His own ball twisted sharply to the left after leaving the light red struck Courtney's ball, took the cushion at an easy angle behind it, went across and rolled the dark red along into the left-hand low pocket. The light red had meantime taken the right-hand cushion and angled back straight into the left-hand pocket at the head of the table, while the other white ball had gone almost straight down to the foot of the table, and then, turning back at an acute angle, had run up almost under the cushion, to finally drop into the right-hand pocket at the head of the table.

It was one of those seldom made thirteen shots which in the early days of the game were the *ultima thule* of the billiardist.

"Good ez wheat!" rumbled a hoarse voice at the sport's shoulder, as he stepped back to survey the results of the shot.

"Never seen et did afore, but I knowed ett war in ther bones. I say, youngster, ett's ther f'ust time, an' ther best lick ever did in hyer, an' the drinks are on you fur ther house."

It was more an order than a request, and it did not seem as though it was given in the best of humors. Courtney faced Billy Beedam, who was the speaker, with a cool stare, and his hand dropped so swiftly into his side pocket the motion was never seen, while he answered coldly:

"Thank you, sir, for the invitation; but I never drink."

CHAPTER XXIX.

PROFESSOR AJAX IS BEWILDERED.

Billy Beedam had apparently been keeping his word to the colonel, and if he was not filling himself up with the various brands of benzine to be found in Yellow Dog then the inhabitants of the burg were vastly mistaken.

Why he should have gone out of his way to start a riot with the young stranger could only be accounted for on the principle of the general cussedness of the man.

Now that the crisis had arrived there was no more sign of the nervousness the sport had noted in Courtney, but he faced the music fairly and firmly, while Billy howled:

"Don't drink? Hark to ther younker! Who wants *him* ter drink. Ett's men thet does that in Yaller Dog, an' all we're askin' is fur him ter set 'em up. He's bin jollyin' 'round ther burg fur some nights, now, an' I onderstands ther boys ain't seen ther color ov his money yit. Thet's played. Waltz out, young man, and make yer shout. I'm Billy Beedam, an' a bad man—spell ett with a great big B."

The sport looked on with an amused smile.

It was not as yet his time to chip in, and no one there could have told how closely he was watching the affair. Enough to say that he did not mean his companion to receive any harm.

In fact, he rather admired the plucky tough who was running against heavier odds, perhaps than he knew, and mentally he decided to let him down as softly as he could if he did nothing worse than a bit of brag and bluff.

He did not count on the major, who was there, and who came to the front before Courtney had time to speak.

"See here, Billy, we are all glad to have you back again, and happy to see you are flush of funds; but if you count on running the town after your old fashion you are away off your altitude. We've got a little beyond that. You know I wouldn't bluff you for a dollar, and so give it to you straight that the style won't work. Try it on and every man within range will try a sitting shot, and you'll go burst just too quick."

Billy gave them a sample of his old style—deadly cool in the midst of the highest excitement.

"Mebbe you don't know ett, major, but what's fun with ther boys is dead earnest with you. Ef yer means ett pull yer weapon, an' I'll give yer ther edvantage ov ther start."

"Excuse me, Billy, I don't intend to do anything of the kind. I simply gave you warning of how the town felt, and if you draw on me a dozen men here will shoot you down before you can pull trigger. That's solid."

"Then let 'em clip away, but I'll bet the Jim Crank ag'in a store box thet you begs er goes onder. I'm on it ter night, big ez a wolf, an' I mean sportin'. Up with yer hands."

With utter recklessness Billy swung out his revolver and covered the major. If he had crooked his finger nothing could have saved Hawke, for though the latter had thought he was speaking truth he did not count on the swiftness with which Billy would act.

Even Take-it-easy Tom was taken by surprise.

The major showed right then the sort of grit which had made him a power in Yellow Dog.

Without flinching, or a word, he folded his arms and gazed into the flaming eyes which met his.

"I'll give yer tell I count five, an' then kims ther end, ef ett makes me climb a tree. One. Two."

Billy had already begun to count, when, from the line of spectators, a man made two giant strides, and as "three" trembled on Beedam's lips caught him by the wrists, which he forced upward as though they were a child's.

"Don't you do it, Billy, don't you dare ter do it. You're clean gone crazy ter-night er you wouldn't have took a shot at me, yer old side pard. Come with me Billy. I want to know something more about the Jim Crank. Don't you remember? We opened that hole together, and I want to know how it's panned out. I got a half interest there, don't you remember?"

The speaker was Professor Ajax, or the man who had claimed that name, though there had been a strange change in him. Without waiting for answer he brought Billy's wrists together, swung him over his shoulder, and without so much as a glance at the spectators strode away with his load.

As he passed through the door they could hear him saying in a lower tone:

"Take it easy, Billy, I ain't going ter hurt ye though you did go back on me to-night. Reckon you didn't know. I want to get a talk with you afore yer clean gone out of yer mind altogether."

The sport understood his allusions as no one else in the room did; but more than a few recognized the bold intruder as the queer crank who had been doing missionary work there for a day or two, and hardly knew what to think. Even yet they were not disposed to set him down altogether as a fraud.

But there were one or two old timers whose wits had begun working, and they offered an explanation which was a surprise.

They remembered now of having heard that Billy Beedam had a pard when he first struck it in the Jim Crank, and though no one remembered anything definite about his appearance it seemed possible this was the man.

There was some laughter, and a good deal of talk; but the pair were not followed. It was not exactly from bashfulness, nor yet from want of curiosity; but largely because it might not be safe. If a report of a pistol was heard it would be time to attempt to intrude on the private interview two old friends were going to have.

As for the little racket Billy had put up, that was part of the evening's amusement, and as long as there was no more harm done no one would be apt to call him to an account for it.

They had not got half done talking it over when the professor came back; and he came alone.

He looked dubiously over the crowd, as though they were all strangers, until his eyes lighted on Edgar Courtney.

He stepped up in a hesitating sort of way.

"Youngster, your face looks familiar, though I can't place it. There seems to be something strange about all this, and if you have any love for a fellow human being who is in distress I wish you would help me get my bearings. Where am I at?"

"You're at the Golden Dream Saloon, the very best layout in Yellow Dog."

"Yellow Dog! This *can't* be Yellow Dog. What's the matter with me? Have I been sick?"

"Looks like it. If you'll feel your head you'll be apt to discover that something has gone wrong with you, anyhow."

"Yes, yes, I know. That's some of Billy's fool play. I never was afraid of him, and I'm not afraid of him now; but I didn't think he'd go back on an old pard. Can you tell me in which direction lies the Jim Crank? I suspect I will find him there, sleeping it off."

"Excuse me, but see hyer, professor, mebbe I kin put yer up to a wrinkle ef ett's ther Jim Crank yer axin' about. You remember me—Boney Wilson,—don't yer?"

"Boney Wilson, eh? Why, this is queer. I never saw yer before; but—but—I must have dreamed about you sure."

"Mebbe yer 'members Purgatory P'int, an' ther big meetin' yer held thar s'uthin' like a month ago?"

"The same old dream; the same old dream. It sounds familiar, but I cannot remember. It appears more like the delusions of fever than reality. And yet—I should say you were a friend to tie to."

"Perhaps yer don't know nothin' 'bout my wringin' yer in at Hard Hank's fur a grub stake. He does, an' says yer jist chain lightnin'."

"Pardon me. I had an idea that I had pawned my guns when I got into the difficulty I could not help but recognize. At least, they were missing. About Hard Hank I can remember nothing."

"Perfesser, I don't want ter harrer up yer feelin's, but ett's strikin' me yer hev backslid wuss than Boney. Ef the boys could hear yer axin' fur yer guns after that style they'd jist give a whoop, an' start on ther down road ag'in, regardless. Thar's nothin' like ett fur ther sheep but ter foller the'r shep'perd. But perfesser, you war sayin' s'uthin' 'bout ther Jim Crank. I reckon I know whar that is, and kin give yer a wrinkle thet may hev s'uthin' ter do with it."

"Ah, that I understand at last. Speak up, my friend."

He reached out and grasped Boney's hand vigorously.

"I tole yer I war startin' south with a waggin' train, mebbe you'll recommem-ber, t'other night at Hank's. Well, they sorter connected you an' me somehow, an' thought I wouldn't work. They fired me, an' I didn't git ter go."

"Sorry, sorry. If you will allow me I will help you over any temporary difficulties."

"Ett ain't that. I felt kinder riled, an' begins ter s'pishun sum gum game war afoot, an' I went fur ter try ter find out—an' I found."

"Well?"

"Shore ernuf,—le'mme whisper ett."

He leaned over and hurriedly poured his story into Budge's ear, unconscious that Tom Taylor's sharp ears were where they could hear the most of it.

"That train war a back ackshun waggin' an' et started frum right whar ther Jim Crank lies. Mebbe I'm wrong, but ett looks ter me ez though thar was s'uthin' wrong about ett. Spose sum galoots hed bia proddin' 'round an' found a rich pocket like. Not prezackly solid ore, but so rich thar would be big money in kerryin' ett of, rock an all. I tell yer, when yer see 'em stoppin' ter pick up a five pound dornick you kin b'lieve thar might be four oughts an a solid figgerhead in that waggin' load. Ef you hev a half int'rest in that outfit yer better be up an' adoin' er ett 'll be over ther border afore mornin'."

"A minute, pard," said the sport, tapping Boney lightly on the shoulder.

"I'm with the professor in this thing, and I won't deny you've told a big story, that's worth rocks. To put us on the right trail, can you tell us who's bossing that outfit?"

"Dunno him by name, but ef he don't swear by ther book ov Moses, an' ain't a died in ther wool Israelite, I don't know beans when ther bag's open."

"Holy Peter! Ef that ain't Barney Behm I don't know 'em either. They're more likely stripping the Fairy Belle, and getting ready for a bolt. Wonder if the major can be in it."

"We'll stop the wagon first, and find out about the rest afterward," broke in Courtney.

"We must find Billy Beedam now. He has as much interest as I," wailed the professor; and just then the major stepped forward.

"Allow me to be one of the party—and I can bring half a dozen good men with me. If my wretched partner has been engineering any such game, I assure you, I will be one of the first to pull on the rope."

"All right! Get up your gang, and do it on almighty short notice. The sooner we get into saddle the sooner we'll have them at bay. And I needn't tell you that the flight we'll be having a little later will be one of the kinds you read about."

They dashed out of the Golden Dream in an excited little bunch, and just as they reached the open air they heard a wild yell. Looking in the direction of the Eagle they saw a glare shoot up; and, "Fire! fire! fire!" yelled men from every side, as before the stiff wind which was blowing, the pillar of flame and cloud of sparks reached low down at the roofs of the buildings which lay to the leeward of the conflagration.

CHAPTER XXX.

FOUL PLAY.

"Johnny, get your gun," said the sport, slapping his hand down on the major's back.

"If you can find half a dozen good men that will leave town right now, trot 'em out, and I reckon the Fairy Belle will stand good for twenty-five a day each while they are on the war path. We've got to get a hustle on, or that mine will be in the courts for want of an owner."

"I'll have them," gritted the major, looking to see that his own possessions were not in the line of the fire.

"But I doubt if you can get them off on a blind trail. This thing looks as though it was going to sweep half the town. If they catch the man who started it he climbs a rope."

"My heavens! They couldn't get Syb out any other way, and so they are smoking her out. This way! and all stick together."

Courtney set the pace, and in a little huddled group, shoulder to shoulder, and ready to shoot at the drop of a hat, the party swept away toward the Eagle.

The saloon emptied itself behind them a moment 'ater, and from every direc-

tion the town was up and rushing. Some few were on the spot, and more were rapidly crowding up, as the party from the Golden Dream came on the scene.

Already things were being carried out of the hotel, since there seemed, with the limited fire extinguishing facilities of the place, not the remotest chance of quelling the flames.

"They are bringing her!" shouted Courtney, his voice sounding shrill and shreddy in the excitement of the moment.

Sure enough, in the doorway appeared a man with Sybarita in his arms, while over their shoulders curled a great following wave of black smoke.

She was struggling violently, as though none too willing to be saved, but the man who carried her seemed to mind the blows she hammered down on his head no more than if they were flea bites as he staggered on, away from the building.

"Hello, what's that!"

Tom Taylor drew his revolvers, but the crowd between gave a frantic rush, and for a moment shut off the view. When he and his companions had plunged forward, forcing their way through, it was too late.

There was a clatter of retreating hoofs, and a mad laugh of defiance; while half a dozen horsemen, with Sybarita in their midst, were boring their way into the darkness which lay to the rear of the Eagle.

For a time at least pursuit was worse than useless, and Take-it-easy Tom and his friends halted to hear what had happened.

The story was soon told.

When the rescuer fairly got outside of the shadow of the burning building a body of horsemen suddenly darted forward, and while one tore the young lady from him the others beat down the man whose arms even yet were unwilling to unclasp.

As he dropped the riders wheeled and made off, leaving him in a quivering heap where he fell. When the crowd rushed forward again they found the stricken man was no other than Billy Beedam.

The professor was at the side of the fallen man in an instant.

Raising him carefully in his arms, he held him like a child, while pouring into his ear:

"Brace up, Billy. I know you are square as they make them, and didn't intend to throw off on your old side partner. They have robbed the Jim Crank, Billy—just stripped it clean of the big pocket I always said would be found there—and they're getting away with it. Wake up and do your duty, Billy. It's not too late to head them off. If they get away with it we're ruined merchants."

Beedam showed signs of returning consciousness. He gasped, and finally gurgled:

"What's that you're saying, pard?"

"They've found a bonanza streak in the Jim Crank, and are skipping out with it."

"Who says so?"

"I say so, sport. I, Boney Wilson, that was a watchin' ov 'em. They hev got all ther mine packed on a bobtail waggin 'ceptin' ther hole, an' they'd a took that ef they'd seen how ter kerry it."

Boney was pitching it pretty strong; but that was what was needed to rouse Billy to action.

"I'm witha yer, pards. Whar's ther rest ov ther gang?"

As he spoke he felt for his pistols and found they were all right. He clasped hands with the professor, and appeared to be ready for the warpath.

The trouble was, the later development made a change in plans, and neither the sport nor Edgar Courtney thought again of the wagon load of bonanza ore, rich though it might be, which they had not intended to capture. Sybarita was the first matter of importance; and it was on the trail of her abductors

that the little party of horsemen, headed by the major and the take-it-easy sport, followed, after but trifling delay.

The professor might have been with them, but Billy Beedam shook his head.

"I begins to understand ther riddle, pard, though you hev changed a heap. Jest hold on. All we got in ther world are tied up in ther Jim Crank, an' ef we lose track ov ett now we're up ther flume. Let 'em go an' we'll tend strickly ter bizziness, ef ett's all by our lonesome selves. I wouldn't wonder ef their trail'd run inter ourn afore we all git done, but ef ett don't who kin blame us? I kin get hosses fur us three, an' ef we don't make a team royal thet kin take keer ov the gang when we ketch up, thar's no use ter lose more good men in a bad job."

Boney Wilson still stuck to the professor, and a little later the three were galloping out of town, with Boney in the lead. The latter could place them on the trail, and after that Billy Beedam would need no guide to follow it.

The train had a start; but not as long as the men in it had expected; and the route by which they went was one over which they could not at first make the speed that such fugitives would wish. Toward morning the road would be smoother, though offering abundant places for halt and defense, in case there was close pursuit.

For some hours the three men swept along, and then, as they reached the mouth of a canyon which opened out into the trail, there was a clatter of horses' hoofs, a dozen riders shot out into the trail, and at the same moment, almost, Billy Beedam reached over and with his clubbed revolver struck the professor a crushing blow on the top of the head.

As Budge reeled out of the saddle, Billy wheeled upon Boney Wilson and covered him with the muzzle of the weapon: "Cave or croak, curse you!" he shouted.

"I guess we can follow this trail without your assistance."

The night was bright, and a man could make no movement at that distance without being seen. Boney had no particular reputation, but he was a man of wit and resources, nevertheless.

He knew there was something out of the common in all this, and when he saw the blow he wheeled his horse. At the sharp order his raised hand caught his hat and hurled it at the threatening muzzle, which it dashed aside just before the shot came.

He waited not an instant after that, but clapped spurs into his horse's sides, at the same time dropping along his neck, Indian fashion.

There were two chances in his favor.

Billy Beedam was between him and the main body beyond, while not twenty yards away they passed a curve in the trail which would perhaps save him now if he could reach it in time.

Once more a bullet sang in his direction, but it only grazed his elbow. It could make matters but little better if he sent back an answer, and though it seemed like a base desertion of the professor, Boney thought his first duty was to himself.

He passed the turn in safety, and went down the grade which lay beyond at a dead run.

"Follow him to the death, and when you bring in his scalp there will be a hundred apiece for you!" shouted the late Billy Beedam; and two men separated from the main body and tore off after Boney.

The latter heard the ringing words, and throwing his right leg loose as he rose in the stirrup, he hung for a moment balancing sidewise. Then he dropped easily to the ground, and as his horse tore on darted into the shadows by the side of the trail.

He knew it would be some time before his steed would be overtaken, and as for his scalp, he meant to keep tight hold of it; and perhaps avenge the treacherous assault on the professor.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A BIG HAUL.

"Now then, the rest of you, forwards! We can't be very far behind, and you want to keep a bright lookout for a wagon train. If you run in on it shoot first and halt afterward. There's not more than half a dozen men in the outfit, and from what I have heard they will be willing to run at the first shot."

The hasty order needed no explaining, and without farther delay the horsemen tore on, not waiting for the return of the men who had followed Boney, nor paying any attention to the other man, who had dropped off to examine the professor.

The road seemed very familiar; and, anyhow, the horsemen could go two yards to the wagon's one. They plunged recklessly on, the hoofs rattling sharply on the stony path. Under such circumstances it was the best policy for the party to keep well bunched together, since it was not likely there would be any delay about joining battle when the fugitives were overtaken.

The first intimation had that they were closing in was the sharp crack of several whips, swung simultaneously, and the sound of not very distant voices. It seemed as though the wagon had been halted on the trail, and that the men with it had heard the pursuing horsemen.

"We've got them, boys! Swing right in on them, reins in teeth, and a gun in each fist! Don't down any horses if you can help it. We'll need them all to move the concern, if it pans out as well as expected. It's the highest grade ore, rich enough to sell by the pound. If we get it over the border once there's nothing can stop us."

It happened that right here was a stretch of level ground, and on either side of the trail the going was as good as in the beaten road.

The charge swirled along at a gradually increasing rate of speed, and the fugitive train came in sight, looming up dark and strange in the gloom of the night air.

The whips were going, and the horses straining at the traces as they galloped heavily forward. This was not the best place to make a stand, or the effort might not have been wasted.

The pursuers gave a cheer and spread out, charging forward in a single line, from which revolvers began to talk as they rapidly overhauled the wagon.

Probably this made the party appear larger than it really was; and the prompt way in which fire was opened showed what might be expected when closer quarters were reached.

Only one man seemed to think of resistance.

He stepped out at the rear and fired several hasty shots. They were fairly well offered, but when he saw that no real damage was done, and that he was only making himself a mark for the bullets which at once began to come dangerously close, he sprang back out of sight, and at the same distance the wagon began to come to a halt.

With a ringing cheer the horsemen dashed on, for they saw from either side dark forms darting away, and knew the train, or whatever it was to be called, was being abandoned to its fate.

Revolvers cracked merrily, but in the indistinct light, and from the backs of galloping horses, even such sure shots as these could not entirely rely on their aim. Though it seemed that more than one of the fugitives was hit, but one of them dropped.

No pursuit was for the present attempted. It was not likely the few runaways would rally again very soon, in the face of such odds, and following them too closely might only force them to bitter defense.

"Steady, now," rang out the voice of the leader.

"Let us see what we have here, and if it is worth the holding. I dropped a man over there; a couple of you look him up."

and if he has life enough in him to talk bring him over. We'll see what sort of a story he has to tell. Keep your ears open for the fools from Yellow Dog. If they don't lose the trail they may be along any time—the sooner the better."

To outward appearance the man was still Billy Beedam; but his voice sounded very much like the voice of Captain Nightking, now that he no longer tried to disguise it. He had heard Boney Wilson tell his story, but was not as yet sure he was altogether reliable, or that his guest was at all near to the truth.

But Boney had told a very straight story, and had hit almost the exact truth in his conjectures.

In one of the mines—as yet it was not certain which, and to Nightking it made precious little difference—had been found a chimney of bonanza ore, not in pure nuggets, of course, but assaying an almost fabulous amount to the ton.

It was too bulky for one man to handle, yet in his double wagon there was a noble fortune of itself; and it might be the cream of the mine from which it came.

The outlaws had not been in these regions so long not to know a good thing when they saw it, and they appreciated the value of their capture, as they looked it over by the light of the lantern found in the wagon. This wealth had dropped right into their hands of its own accord, without a particle of planning on their part, and was worth more than the plunder of dozens of coaches.

"Half a dozen men will go on with the wagon," said the chief promptly. "Manuel will know how to dispose of it if we can't smelt it ourselves; but it must not be cached this side of the border. The rest of us will hold back and stand off any pursuit, joining you two days hereafter at the lower stronghold. What is this?"

Two of the outlaws brought forward between them a groaning man and dropped him carelessly at the feet of the captain, who held down the lantern to obtain a view of the features.

"Hello! The amiable Skeeter, or I am a liar. What you doing this far from Yellow Dog?"

"Jest a gruntin'," answered Skeeter, with a ghastly grin.

"Who's running this outfit—not you?"

"Nothin' like a clean breast ov ett, I reckon. Barney Behm war a runnin' ov ett tell we got over ther line. Ez he's skipped out I reckon I'm ther next best man."

"If you had stayed and fought it out I could have understood it, but what in blazes did you run away for? Sorry, but you're not fit for a job, and I'm afraid this thing is going to put me a little short of hands. You might as well have been in this with me as with Barney Behm."

"A heap sight better, boss, ef I'd on'y knowed you'd take ett that way. Not half so likely ter be cheated outen me eye teeth, and left along ther road, some'ers ter starve. You wouldn't hev no use fur a cripple, I reckon."

"Look him over, and if he seems able to stand the trip take him along; I may want to talk to him."

"An' ef he don't seem ez though he could pull through?"

"Oh, lift his scalp, I suppose. He knows too much to be left behind."

"Great grippeds, boss, don't say that. Ett's on'y a leetly weenty hole in me arm, an' ef one ov ther boyees'll tie ett up I kin travel frum hyer ter Halifax."

Skeeter spoke in much anguish of soul, for he knew there was little of jest in the grim retort.

"Rustle out one of your drivers, then, and you can try it a whirl. You're not much good by yourself."

Skeeter caught at the situation, and had hopes. Several of the outlaws were standing by the teams, holding them in order, but they did not know much about the management of them. He lifted up his voice.

"Tomasso, oh, Tomasso!"

Two or three times did he repeat this, with variations, before an answer came. The result, however, was that Tomasso, a dark-faced Mexican, came out from his hiding place, and with little bargaining or explanation agreed to attach himself to the party.

Some little private instruction the outlaw chief gave to the man who acted as his lieutenant; the party to accompany the captured wagon was told off, and the train was once more on the move, while Nightking and the balance of his party wheeled, and started on the back track.

As they moved back Nightking caught a glimpse of something like a human shadow flitting before them. His hand was up in an instant, and he gave a stern order to halt; but before he could be sure it was not one of his own men the person vanished, and, though he dashed forward, no trace of the man could be found.

It was the dark hour just before the dawning, and, though in the east a faint streak of light was just about to show itself, at this moment search was useless, and the outlaws did not care to longer delay.

A scout was sent on a few rods ahead, and then the main body followed steadily until the canyon running into the trail was reached.

Up this for some distance they made their way, until finally a practical path up one of the sides was found, which they ascended in silence, Nightking going first of all.

At the top he halted and waved his men to a halt as he took a survey of the ground by the light of the now rising sun.

"Steady, now," he whispered; "we have them in a box. Here's the youngster, and that infernal sport, with their little gang behind them. Lie low and wait for orders."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SPORT SHOWS GAME.

The little delay in Yellow Dog while the major was arranging for mounting the squad was more than vexatious. With other men it might have been the cause of their losing the trail altogether.

The outlaws were well enough out of sight, and it was uncertain which way they had gone, yet chance favored them.

The light of the conflagration brought in a man who lived in a cabin a mile from the town, and he had heard the horsemen sweep by. It was to look after them that he arose; and then he saw the glare of the furious fire.

With that hint their probable course could be guessed at; and the little party set out with a determination to make up for lost time.

Comparative stranger though he was, the sport had a natural talent for discovering and understanding the lay of the land; and though he trusted none too much in the major he was willing to use his knowledge, which was extensive.

Without an error they followed the devious path of the outlaws, after it left the main trail; and though not much ground was gained daylight found them full of hope.

From what the major said they were now in the neighborhood of what was known to be one of the lurking places of the outlaws, and they believed that when the search was again begun they would be able exactly to locate it.

For the present they were halted, giving the horses a few moments of rest, after having watered them at the stream they had just passed.

"Don't get too far away from your horse," said the sport, warningly.

"It all looks safe as a church, but there's no telling how soon they may show up, and this is not exactly the place I would choose for a scrimmage."

"Little danger of their finding us here, even if they were willing to turn and fight, as I only wish they would. They may be two to one, but I fancy a righteous cause would make such odds even."

"Don't you pin too much faith to the righteousness of this same cause. Every-

thing is going to depend on straight shooting, and which side gets in their work first."

"That may all be, but for the sake of Syb I'd be willing to try them a whirl; and I'm not afraid you'll be at all backward when the ball opens."

"Oh, that goes without saying. I'm with you, and expect to stay; but I'd just as soon not be taken at a disadvantage. Of course, I can hit what I shoot at, and pull trigger as fast as any of them, but I don't want to see you get into any snarl—great governors! they're coming now."

There was no one in sight, and not a sound came to Edgar Courtney's ears, but the sport was on the alert. He had drawn aside to follow Courtney, who had allowed his horse to stray a little from the rest, and the bridle of his own horse was over his arm.

With a sudden dart he caught the young fellow, raised him easily from the ground, flung him on his own horse, and then gave the animal a sharp stroke on the shoulder.

"Keep straight on down the stream, and shoot wherever you see a head; we'll join you later on!" he shouted, as horse and rider dashed away. Then he flung himself prone on the ground, his two hands, each grasping a pistol, extended.

As for the four or five men who had been huddling around the major, they had been if anything prompter to move, for they and he were already in the saddle, and off in the opposite direction.

"Steady now, sport!" came the order, unmistakably in the tones of Nightking.

"Sixes against Winchesters is no go, and we have you covered. When we let you go you'll lie still, and you may as well take it easy."

"That's just my name. I'm willing to take it easy—just so easy—if you can show that it will be any better for pard and me; but when I don't take it easy I'm a roaring lion from 'wayback, and perhaps I might devour a few of you, Winchesters and all."

"Your pard has just run himself into a trap. There are three men waiting for him down below, and there are six of us here, aiming at the butt of your ear. Shall we pull; or will you cave?"

"And what do you suppose the major and his gang'll be doing?"

"Getting back to Yellow Dog as fast as horseflesh will carry them. They are no good, anyhow. You and your sweet young pard are the ducks we are after, and if we can't have them one way we will another. Which is it to be? We'd rather put you in a pen till this thing blows over, but cold meat is soon buried."

"Well, pard, it looks as though things had come your way," drawled the sport; "but let's talk it over a little. Here am I, with my guns."

"Not another word. Ill give you till I count five to surrender or say your prayers. Then, boys, if his hands ain't up, do your duty. You sabbe?"

A chorus of affirmative growls rang out from various points not far away, and the sport knew that he was in a strait where resistance was folly, for the first offensive move of his meant death.

"Hands are up, boss. When I can't do any better I'm ready to cave. I'll take your word for it that it's better than killing off a few of your coyotes, and then going out of the wet myself. Touch me lightly, though, for I'm not used to roughhandling, and when I flare up I hit to kill, regardless."

As he spoke he reversed his revolvers, and grasping them by the muzzles rose up with his hands well over his head.

He was by no means certain a volley would not follow the action, but he trusted to his luck to see him through with this adventure, which began to have a desperate look.

Nightking himself stepped forward and relieved him of his weapons, but from a furtive glance he could not help giving in the direction Courtney had taken, Taylor received a hint.

"Begins to look as though those three men down there ought to be making themselves heard from, eh?"

"Dry up! Here! Two of you take him over to the cave; two watch that the major don't get up his nerve and come back on us, and the rest follow on down the flume. He can't have slipped through; but he may be trying to lay low. If he had got to the other end we would have heard from the boys before now."

"Say, you wouldn't like me to go along?" suggested Tom, with every appearance of good faith.

"Away with him! Walk behind him, and if he tries to make a break shoot him dead," was the harsh order of the captain, who utterly ignored the request.

With a graceful bow the sport turned and preceded his guides, while Nightking and his remaining men went down the course of the stream.

It was easily seen why he had believed that Courtney would ride straight into the tra, prepared beyond.

Along the course of the stream the ground was level, almost, as a floor, save for the gentle slope, but on either side the ground arose, the more rugged the farther they proceeded.

Once fairly enmeshed and there was little chance of turning aside.

And straight down the gorge ran the tracks of the furiously ridden horse.

The mouth of the gorge was not far away, and the captain was beginning to think that the capture had been quietly made without the necessity of firing a shot, but unexpectedly he came upon certain marks which made him halt in angry surprise.

What had really happened he read on the soft ground at the spot almost as well as though he had been there.

Edgar Courtney, rushing headlong down the gentle decline, had suddenly been startled by the appearance of a man, who sprung up almost in front of the flying steed, and caught it by the bit, at the same time exclaiming:

"Hold hard. I'm yer solid friend, an' thar's three ov ther agents a waitin' fur yer jest down ther bend."

Edgar gave a long pull and a strong pull on the lines, with instinctive confidence in this man, who showed no weapons, and spoke with the tones of very truth.

"Who are you?" he exclaimed, one hand dropping to a pistol as the horse came to an almost instantaneous halt.

"I'm Boney Wilson, ez jest got away from Nigh'king and his gang, which played roos on me an' ther perfesser. I got erway, but they scooped him, an' I'm follerin' ter see what they be goin' ter do about ett. This hyer's yer only chance."

He pointed to a practical path on the side of the gorge, up which a moment later they were scrambling. Scarcely had they passed from sight behind the crown of the bank when Nightking and his men came on the scene.

There were no footprints to show which way the fugitives had gone, but the chief took in the situation in a second.

"Two of you follow. Take him if you can; if you can't, hang on to the trail until one of you can come back with news. There are too many getting scattered around, and we'll have to begin to make a dead clean-up as we go along. The rest of you follow back. If he happens to join the major he'll give a hack at us from the other end if they find us here, and perhaps make a rush for the sport if they don't."

The tramp back the gorge was hurriedly made, and then they went on up to the open ground over the route followed by the men in charge of Tom Taylor.

As they hurried along they found they were overtaking the guards, who were quite leisurely following the prisoner, though the trio were still some distance off.

The sport looked back over his shoulder, as if to say something to his guards, and appeared to stumble over an unequal-

ity of the ground. He blundered forward, throwing his hands down to save himself, and then was up and around with his two hands pointing at his captors.

There were two little puffs of smoke, and then a single report, at which the two men staggered back and fell, while the sport dashed away like the wind.

"Your Winchester!" shouted the captain to the man next to him, and as the weapon was passed to him he dropped on one knee and raised the sights for eight hundred yards.

Then he coldly glanced through the sights and pulled trigger.

The sport leaped high in the air, turned a somersault or two, and lay still.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BARNEY BEHM SHOOTS STRAIGHT.

The sport was not dead.

By the time Nightking and his men had reached his side he was muttering to himself in a dazed way, but it was evident that either his strength had not returned, or that he had not yet regained his senses. He looked up at the chief with a glance which showed no recognition, and then went on muttering to himself.

"Tie his hands and feet, and see that there is no chance for him to get away. He is the evil genius of the play; one way or another he must never interfere again. Let us see what he has done."

He turned aside to investigate the two motionless little heaps some distance away. When he returned his face was stern, and his lips were set in a cruel smile.

"Two of you bring up the spotted mustang," he said, in a low, compressed tone.

While the two men were obeying the order he stared into the face to which the color was beginning to return.

"You can understand me, now, can you not?"

The sport returned no answer, but the dazed look had gone from his eyes and though there was a smutch of blood on the ground, Nightking was sure that if the prisoner had not been well tied he would have been up and answering in the strong way he had when he had an objection to make.

"You have chipped into this game without rhyme or reason. You haven't even the excuse that you were working for wages, or that it was in the cause of an old friend. If you had gone quietly I might have turned you adrift when the time came you could do no more harm. Now, you have murdered two of my men, and I intend to kill you. There is no use to make any remarks as I have quite made up my mind. Here. Two of you slip a noose around his neck. They are bringing the spotted mustang now."

The mustang came plunging. He had the temper of Satan, but he could be ridden by a man who had a cool head, strong limbs, and a cruel curb, and who was wise enough to keep out of reach of his heels.

The noose of the lasso was adjusted around the neck of the sport; the other end was knotted tightly to the saddle horn, whilst two men held on to the bit of the plunging horse. There were a dozen yards or more of rope, between man and brute, and the head of the latter was pointed down the slope.

"Let go!" thundered the chief, striking the mustang fiercely with a rope's end; and the gripes on the bit loosening the horse sped away, whilst at his heels dragged the writhing form of the bound sport.

After a little it straightened out, as though past farther feeling, and by the time the mustang vanished from view he seemed altogether dead.

"Let them go," the chief said, coldly.

"The spotted mustang will circle back in time, to join its fellows. If it does not get used to the load it drags within an hour some of you may mark him down and bury the thing. He, at least,

is out of the game for good. Follow the orders I have given you, and I hope we will be ready soon for a move."

By this time the horses had all been brought up, and the captain, throwing himself carelessly on his, rode away alone.

The men glanced after him as he went, and then down toward the spot where they had last seen the fleeing mustang. Hardened though they were, the disposition of the sport was something of a shock. After a little it seemed to them they heard a single pistol shot.

"Dead sure thet ett ain't ther sport, onless his spook knows how ter handle a gun," grinned one of the men.

"All the same, we want to find out what it means. I would a bit sooner gone on with the wagons, for I tell you, when Yellow Dog gets time to turn around, it'll be apt to take a general hand in."

"Yaller Dog hez ernough ter keep ett at home fur a while. All the same, yer right. We'll go down an' 'vestergate."

The two men went off together, and they moved with caution.

While it was not likely there was as yet any force in the neighborhood of which there was reason to be afraid, it was as well to be on guard.

They searched for some time, but found no traces of any one who might have fired the shot, and after a time even lost the trail of the fugitive mustang.

One thing seemed to be certain, however. There was no large body of men in that direction, or they would have struck it. Feeling this way, and puzzling somewhat over what had become of the dead sport, they returned as cautiously as they had come.

The shot they heard had in reality a good deal to do with the sport, and it was only the merest chance they did not learn at what it had been aimed. If, at one time, they had veered but a few rods to one side, they would have come to a spot where they might have seen the spotted mustang, lying with his head under him, just where he fell when he dropped to that single shot.

A man stealing along saw the animal come toward him, with slow and labored gallop. Nightking had hardly remembered what the journey of the past night had taken out of the mustang.

A second glance showed the lariat rope, and the object which trailed at the farther end of it.

"Holy Moses!" muttered the man.

"It ish der shport, und dere vosh anoder week's interest due, und all of der brinsibal. He moost be shtopped."

He raised his heavy revolver, and as the mustang was swooping past aimed for a spot just back of the shoulder, and fired.

Down dropped the steed, and, first giving a keen glance around to make sure there were no observers in sight, Barney Behm hastened out to the body.

He had no idea of finding life in it, but he was not sure the pockets had been rifled, and, if they were not, he intended to administer on the effects and satisfy his lien as far as they would go.

As he came up he saw that the noose was around the sport's neck; but he saw something else.

The lasso was held by the teeth of the sport in a deathlike grip.

"Father Apraham, und der odder batriarchs! dere's life in him yet!"

The exclamation was the truth.

Bruised and battered the sport might be, with wrists and ankles torn and swelled and face cut and bleeding, but his heart still beat, and he gasped once as Barney, casting off the noose, raised him to his shoulder and bore him away to cover.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE PERIL OF SYBARITA.

Sybarita had been handled with as much tenderness as she could ask for under the circumstances.

Awakened by the cry of fire, she had proceeded to draw on such of her clothing as she had laid aside. Her promise

to Edgar held her there, and she had decided not to leave the room until the last moment. The window was already open, and it was not far to the ground.

After a little a man came darting in, and she recognized the colonel.

"Quick, follow me!" he exclaimed. "There is no time to lose. There is a plot of some kind afoot, and you must make your escape without being seen."

He spoke hastily, and caught Sybarita by the arm to draw her away.

She was not yet ready to go; and perhaps did not altogether trust Ransome, much as her feelings had changed since knowing him better.

"No. I have promised Edgar not to leave until he comes. He will surely be here in a moment."

"Nonsense! The fire is gaining, and in another moment our way to the rear will be cut off. There can be no delay."

The force he was using was gentle, but force it was, and Sybarita gave a cry which rang out into the smoke which was drifting in through the open door. As if in answer a man sprang into the room—a man whom the colonel seemed to recognize as Billy Beedam.

Without a word he dashed at the colonel, who was looking for no such movement, and with one powerful blow struck him down. As Ransome touched the floor the other man caught the girl up and rushed out with her in his arms. He fought their way out through the smoke, and hardly had he won the open air when he seemed to be attacked as fiercely as Ransome had been. Sybarita was wrested from his arms, and before she could well realize what had happened was being borne away in the night.

There seemed to be no pursuit, nor did the men who rode at her side appear to fear any. Never at fault, they went on at a sweeping gallop, and her courage and strength were sorely tried before the halt that was made an hour or so before morning.

Then two of the outlaws remained as guides and guard, while the rest swept on.

Half an hour later she found herself installed as a prisoner in one of the raiders' strongholds, alone in a cell-like apartment of the cave, but knowing well there was no chance for her to escape past the guards who were stationed a little bit away.

Had the path been ever so open, it is doubtful if she would have cared to move. Fatigue had been too much for her, and now she thought only of rest.

Casting herself down upon a rude pallet, she closed her eyes. When she opened them again the man who had assumed the garb of Billy Beedam was bending over her.

He had a lantern with him, and as he held it up, evidently with the intention of inspecting her face, its light fell rather upon his own, and the sight confused her.

For the instant she half imagined she was back in Yellow Dog.

The man was slightly confused also. He did not seem to care to have her identify him for the present, and stepped back, depositing the lantern on a rough table near at hand. For a little while he was silent, perhaps waiting for her to speak. As she said nothing, he began himself.

"Though you cannot know much of what the town has been thinking this evening, and wouldn't understand it if you did, I may as well begin by saying that I risked my life in that confounded burg, and if it had been discovered who I really was I would have stretched hemp without waiting for the farce of a trial."

"What is that to me?" asked Sybarita, coldly.

She had risen from her recumbent position and was staring at her visitor in a way that seemed to render him uncomfortable.

"Nothing, except to show you the kind of a man you are dealing with. I fancy, however, that you will be more surprised than ever when you learn something I

shall tell you before this interview is over."

"Proceed. If anything in this heaven-deserted country can surprise me, you are welcome to all the profit you can make out of the operation."

"Perhaps you will reconsider your opinion. In the first place, I am after the Fairy Belle—or at least my half of it."

"Your half indeed! What possible interest can you claim in it?"

"Perhaps I should claim it all, but I was always too generous for my own good. I am willing to compromise on the half. I am growing tired of the life of excitement I have been leading, and want to settle down. From what I hear of the mine left you by your lately deceased and much lamented father, I imagine it is the one thing I have been looking for. Of course, I have placed no reliance on any reports which Hawke and Behm have put out, as I know them of old. And when I heard the heiress was coming to investigate I said that is just my game. I'll see if she wants a partner. If she don't, I am afraid she will have to retire and allow me to take possession of the whole of it."

"Thanks for your plainness; but even if I were out of the road and you were able to come and go as you chose, I don't see how you could put in any claim that would be worth anything."

"I did not suppose that you did; but without beating around the bush I might say that I am your nearest blood relative, and if anything should happen to you the estate would naturally fall to me. And somehow I do not think you have the appearance of a very long-lived person."

"It is false. I have but one near relative living—my cousin."

"Exactly. Edgar Courtney—that is your humble servant. The young whipper-snapper posing under that handle is a fraud."

Sybarita was more moved than she had ever expected to be. She gave a little cry, and, bending forward, peered anxiously at the man who had made that cool declaration.

"You—you do not talk like an outlaw," she murmured at length.

"Singular what differences of opinion there can be. Several other people have remarked that I did not talk like an honest man."

"But Edgar Courtney—the Edgar Courtney of whom you speak—died years ago."

"Ha, ha! You are probably aware that you have given away your little game. I am that Edgar Courtney, and very much alive. Of course, I knew the young man you had in tow could not be your cousin, though there were some amazing points of similarity. Pity it was that when you were looking around for a protector you did not happen to find the real article. It might have saved a world of trouble, for, outlaw though I may have been, it is rather revolting to my pride to come in at second hand—to take a place in your affections."

"You are mistaken, sir. The person to whom you allude is my cousin. To that you can have my sworn word. And my Edgar Courtney is that and nothing more, unless it be a very dear friend."

Indignant and proud, she drew herself up to her full height, for she had sprung to her feet at the opening of the interview.

"It may be so," said the outlaw in a musing tone. "The old proverb says that women are strange. Nevertheless, I suspect it would be necessary for the youngster to die. These very dear friends are dangerous brutes to have around after marriage. He's a touchy little bantam, moreover, and I wouldn't like to run the risks of having him running at large and thinking you had not treated him well. He might take a sitting shot at us both."

"I cannot profess to understand you."

"My dear cousin, how can you pretend to be so blind? You must see that I am

figuring how it may be possible to save your life. As my wife, I could take possession of the mine—and certain other effects—in your name, and leave the matter of being next of kin entirely in abeyance."

"You wretch! You have one wife living; what use for you to talk of another?"

The outlaw started.

"A wife living? In that you are surely mistaken."

"Scarcely, since I have already been interviewed by her. She is, or was, somewhere within the confines of Yellow Dog, and she does not intend to give you up. In fact, she was inclined to blood and slaughter when I talked with her. A little more and she would have poured out her vials of wrath on me. I did not understand her then, but I see through the mystery now. She has been watching you and divining your intention a good deal closer than you thought."

"Really you have done me a favor, as I find there are some farther preparations to be made. You can hardly have any especial objections to a widower, and I promise you it will not be necessary for you to wait until the customary year of mourning has elapsed."

"And you still hold seriously to this monstrous purpose?"

"Of course. The more I see of you—and I confess my view of your actual personality has been none too clear—the more I am inclined to avoid the only alternative—your death."

"But your wife—the woman who at least swore to me she was such—what would you do with her?"

"Kill her, of course, if you have made no mistake. I had no idea she was in the neighborhood, but it may be so, and she would not be hard to find."

"Brute!"

"Well, yes, it may sound brutal, but that is just what I want. You must fully understand I mean exactly what I say, and then there will be no sentimental nonsense over what is a mere matter of business. The Fairy Belle is the least important item in the schedule of your possible possessions, and if you knew the history of your family better you would understand."

"There is little of the family left to enquire about."

"On your mother's side, girl, there is a million waiting for you."

"Then you never intended to kill me, after all."

There was a near approach to a laugh in the tones, which had tears in them after all.

"Poor fellow! Cannot you understand?"

She stopped suddenly and glared over and beyond the outlaw, who, puzzled by her manner and by something in her voice, could only stare at her.

What she saw was a shadowy figure stealing in behind the man who faced her, and who seemed almost his duplicate.

There was a look of savage hate on his face, and once or twice he silently raised the knife he held in his hand, but as often stole nearer.

Then at last he sprang like a tiger.

"You'd play Billy Beedam, would yer? Curse you, Billy Beedam is here!"

As he sprang Sybarita leaped. She flung her arms around the outlaw as if to shield him, and as Billy Beedam ground out his words the knife came hissing down and drove through her shoulder.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE PROFESSOR COMES OUT STRONG.

"Say, old man, this is three times, round and out. Blamed if you shan't have your principal and interest, if I have to pawn my guns and go into a nunnery for a year of meditation and prayer. You're a smooth pressed brick, Milwaukee at that."

The speaker was Take-it-easy Tom, and he was looking up, not so terribly the worse for wear, into the face of Barney Behm, who had been cautiously

feeding him whiskey from the flask he held in his hand.

Barney shook his head thoughtfully, and slowly rubbed his jaw. He did not seem altogether willing to admit the impeachment.

"Oh, yes. I have it down fine. You put Creepy up to helping me out when Skeeter was going to take a pot shot. Then you chipped when Hawke—it was Hawke, wasn't it—had me in the box. And now—if that brute had dragged me a dozen yards farther he would have knocked my brains out, and you would have just found a corpse holding on to the rope with its teeth. I never let go."

"Dot may be right, but idt makes no tifference now. Der geldt ish in der handts of der agents, undt I'd give der brincibal undt interesht for a horse to get back to Yellow Tog before dey findsh me missing."

"It can't be done, Barney, not in the higher mathematics; but I reckon I'll be able to stand your friend a trifle for the sake of the good you have done, though the firm of Hawke and Behm will probably dissolve by something like mutual consent. There has been a bigger hand than yours in the game, but I don't think it is going to win. Help me against it, and I'll swear you won't be the loser."

"Dere wosh a hundret t'ousand tollars in der waggons."

"I know; I know; but it's not lost yet, if your share may be scaled down a trifle. I see you are pretty well heeled; lend me a revolver."

Barney shook his head mournfully, but handed over the weapon, which the sport examined to see that it was all right, and then thrust into his boot.

"I dropped my extra derringers they had forgotten to look for, but they're no good at long range. Now then, old man, I know you have nerve, and I'll expect you to stand up to the rack. We are not just exactly alone in these solitudes, and I want to find out where the rest of us are at."

"Perhaps I can tell you," said a solemn voice near at hand, which made the sport wheel around like lightning.

"Blamed if it ain't the professor. What news?"

"I seem to be living, but I feel very much as though I had been dead, and certainly I have been temporarily buried, though, thank goodness, the work was not well done. The man whom I took for my old partner, Billy Beedam, betrayed me. Perhaps he has betrayed Billy too."

"Most likely. He's an all-around sort of a man, if I'm not 'way off. It's about time that we got down to solid business. What is it you said you knew?"

"Billy and I prospected through here some years ago, and if they have taken to a hole, most likely I know where it is, and the ways in and out. William is what the boys called a holy terror. Unless they have killed him altogether, they may find him such if he gets loose among them."

"All right. Let it go at that. We want to be hunting that same spot you speak of. There is a young lady in this game who wants to be looked after first of all, though I've a young side pard who counts a close second."

"Hush!" said the professor, sinking down; and the rest followed his example, looking in the direction of his pointing finger.

In the distance they saw a squad of outlaws falling backward toward the hill where Tom had lately taken his awful ride.

"They are falling back on their retreat, but let them go," continued Ajax in a whisper.

"I suspect they are playing with some of the men from Yellow Dog, but if we come in on their rear it will be a different matter."

After a little they rose again, and went on their way. The sport limped painfully at times, and Barney was not pressing forward to the front in eagerness, yet they continued to advance. A

presentiment that he was needed drew the sport along, and Barney seemed determined not to lose his chance for principal and interest, if he had failed in the great game for gold.

As for the professor, his mildness of manner had largely evaporated, and he was on the trail for vengeance.

Ajax deflected to the left, and, after a toilsome climb, they reached a spot among broken rocks which overlooked the land below.

Then they saw that the squad of outlaws was retiring leisurely before another little bunch of men, who followed their trail with caution, yet firmly.

But farther off still came another and larger body yet.

"Great Jupiter!" exclaimed the sport, his sharp eyes reading the story even at that distance.

"The outlaws are keen for work. That first gang are just coaxing my little side pard into a trap. That's him at the head of the second bunch. When they get him in the box those fellows behind will just close up behind and grind him to powder. We must go down and take a hand in. Pistols won't reach 'em from here."

"Wait," said the professor, pointing to a low opening under a jutting rock.

"You would be too late. Here is the better road. Follow me, and we will be in a little before the death."

He placed both feet in the opening, raised his arms above his head, and disappeared from sight in an instant.

The sport bent down and listened. After a little he heard the voice of the professor faintly calling to come on. He turned to Barney.

"Sail in, old man. I'll bring up the rear, or your courage might fail you."

"Holy Apraham, dot might be a drap." "So it might, but down you go. Sabbe?"

The sport's voice was stern, and his face said that he did not mean to be denied. Without another word Barney took the chute.

The sport followed as soon as he knew the way was clear. Ajax evidently was sure of his ground, and so far there seemed to be little danger in the path.

He slid down without accident, and was caught in the arms of Budge when the chute came to an ending, some thirty or forty feet below. They seemed to be in a narrow passage which still had a downward tendency. Around them all was darkness, but the professor led the way with confidence.

After a little they saw a glimmering light ahead of them, and a moment later heard a woman's scream.

"It is Sybarita!" shouted the sport, and the three darted forward.

They heard the clang of steel, as blade met blade, and, bursting into the room from whence the sound came, saw two men, who looked enough alike to be doubles, though one them was coatless, fighting a wicked fight for life and death.

As they entered, the crack and rattle of firearms behind came with them. The cooler of the fighters srang backward, and, reversing his knife, hurled it hilt forwards full into the face of the true Billy Beedam. Then, with a ringing cry, he leaped over the falling man and darted out of the cell by another entrance.

It is doubtful if he saw the three who were hurrying in, and who halted as they saw him make his exit. Just then it made little difference to them whether the true Billy Beedam was dead or alive. They saw nothing of Sybarita, who lay senseless in the shadow, but they had recognized Nightking in spite of his disguise, and knew if he joined his men it would be to double their strength by his single will.

"The fight seems to be joined," exclaimed the professor. "It is time that we were with them. That was the villain who betrayed me, and if he has killed Billy I will avenge the death. Come."

They rushed back along a corridor, and

were none too soon. Light streamed in through the mouth of the cave, and in its glare they could see the outlaws taking aim at the men from Yellow Dog, who were rushing forward. The shots at long range seemed to have had little effect.

"Take it easy," whispered the sport; "just so easy. We have them in a box. Each of you pick your man, and leave Nightking for me. I'll wing him for keeps, but he's too big a scoundrel to throw cold without a warning. Fire!"

The three shots rang out, making a noise as of the firing of a platoon, and the three men fell, Nightking first of all. As the outlaws turned in some confusion, the men without came bursting in, Edgar Courtney and Colonel Ransome side by side and first of all.

"Sybarita—where is Miss Courtney?" shouted the colonel as he recognized Tom Taylor's voice.

"Yonder. Look after her; we can attend to these," was the sport's answer, and the colonel went rushing on.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

UNRAVELING THE SNARLS.

It was the outlaws in the cave who were crushed. The unexpected attack in the rear had so disorganized them that there was little thought of resistance once they knew their captain was down.

Instead, they made a determined break for the opening, believing that the main body of their foes was behind them. Three or four more dropped or limped away, badly wounded, and the whole body pushed down the decline in flight.

Several men were there who had come out with the colonel, whilst others were of the squad raised by Hawke. In addition, there was Boney Wilson, who had done good service. The sport checked farther pursuit, for he had an idea that it would be as well not to goad the outlaws too hard. They were capable of a very good fight when at bay, and he had no time just then to take a hand in it. He placed his men on guard, and then followed on the course taken by Edgar and the colonel. Though he had not seen Sybarita, he knew she was somewhere hidden in the darkness.

When he reached the spot where he had seen Billy Beedam and Nightking fighting their duel with knives, the colonel was there and had found her. With firm but nasty hands he was binding up the wounded shoulder, and he did it so thoroughly that no surgeon could have stopped the flow of blood better.

No doubt the shock had been a great one, but Sybarita was still sensible. She turned a grateful glance on the colonel, and whispered:

"Edgar! Where is he? I must see him."

"Here I am, my dear. What is it you want?" said Edgar, coming forward.

"No, not you; the other Edgar—Nightking—my brother."

"Good heavens! Her mind must be wandering!"

"No. It is not wandering. We thought he was dead, but he turns up here, where least expected. I must tell him the truth. Do not tell me he was killed."

"No, unless my lead flew a little wilder than it usually does; but I had to let him down a litte hard, with a broken knee. I doubt if he ever rides a horse again. Shall we bring him in?"

The sport was no less astonished than the rest, and spoke in accents of real concern.

"If he can bear to be moved. I can hardly go to him."

When they brought him in his knee had been bandaged, but he was in pain, none the less. He nodded to Sybarita with a ghastly attempt at a smile.

"Well, cousin mine, it seems it was not so to be, and you now hold the whip hand. All the same I recognize that you saved my life, and I am really glad it was not at the expense of your own, though I reckon you had a moderately close thing of it."

"Oh, Edgar! It cannot be that you do not recognize me—that you do not understand. I am not your cousin!"

"Who then are you?"

"Your own sister."

"Who, then, is that?" And he pointed at Edgar, who was looking on with a troubled face.

"That is the true Sybarita. I am only her cousin Clarice, and not the heiress at all."

"Thank heaven for that! It will be all the easier to make you believe that I fell in love with you for yourself alone," whispered the colonel, and the face of Clarice flushed just a little as she heard the speech.

It might fill numerous pages to explain all the motives, and all the actions, of the parties to the plots and plotting over the Fairy Belle, and the Courtney fortune which lay beyond it. It will be better to dismiss the subject in a few words.

The late Sybarita had told the truth. When the girls decided to come west to look after the mine, they evolved this scheme. The real Sybarita was something more than a school girl. She was a woman of steel nerves and muscles. She had received a pretty fair idea of the position of affairs at Yellow Dog, and imagined that, by visiting it in disguise, she might the better look after her own interests and the safety of her cousin. She certainly had carried out the scheme faithfully until it was given away by Clarice.

The real Edgar, the ne'er do well, had been long since declared dead, and his coming upon the scene caused a complication never dreamed of.

After having risked her life to save him, it was not likely Clarice would consent to seeing him handed over to the law. So, under the surgery of the sport, he was plastered up, after a fashion, and smuggled over the line into Mexico. He lasted some time after that, and may even be alive yet; but he has never been in the saddle since, and there was even some pretense between the cousins of believing that he had not only reformed, but repented. Let us hope that it may have been so.

Shortly after the raids of the outlaws, Billiard Belle disappeared from Yellow Dog. There were two or three who more than suspected that she was the wife of Edgar Courtney, and had at last found his trail and gone to join him.

In the shuffle Major Hawke appeared to have been lost, and his disappearance was a nine-days wonder. Half a dozen knew the story in its truth, and, for a wonder, kept the secret. When Boney Wilson was guiding the supposed Edgar Courtney away from the spot where they had baffled the outlaws they met the Major, and, on his making a deliberate attempt on Edgar's life, Boney shot him down. It is possible that Hawke had fathomed the secret. If so, he paid for it with his life.

Barney Behm got his principal, interest, and something more. The combination wagon, loaded with bonanza ore, was recaptured, and, as it proved to have come from the Fairy Belle, he was allowed his share under the old contract, which was then annulled. The fact was, Barney was not as bad as painted, and the sport had a warm spot in his heart for the fellow who had several times saved his life, selfish though the acts may have been.

Billy Beedam and the professor got together, and everything was finally explained. The professor had received an injury on the head and wandered away, and Billy had held on to the title of the Jim Crank pending his return. Night-king had taken Billy off the stage, and mounted himself, whilst the man who acted the innocent passenger was another outlaw in disguise. The shot through the window of Ransome's office restored the professor's wits, though some thought rather at the expense of his soul. He exhorted no more, and never mentioned again the University of Nevada. The two partners worked the Jim Crank for all that was in it, and made much coin thereby.

The reader has already seen, no doubt,

how matters were going with the colonel and Clarice, and will hardly be surprised that in the Take-it-easy Sport the real Sybarita found a man after her own heart, while he thought her the one woman in a thousand. When the two men took their newly made wives away on a wedding trip, they left Boney Wilson in charge of the Fairy Belle. And when the ladies left, Yellow Dog unanimously pronounced them two trumps from Trumville and a winning pair.

THE END.

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